

# Beyond SUFFERING

A CHRISTIAN  
VIEW  
ON DISABILITY  
MINISTRY

AN INTRODUCTION FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERS



FOUR  
SESSION  
STUDY

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JONI EARECKSON TADA & STEVE BUNDY

WITH PAT VERBAL

CHRISTIAN INSTITUTE ON DISABILITY • JONI AND FRIENDS INTERNATIONAL DISABILITY CENTER



*Beyond Suffering: An Introduction for Christian Leaders*  
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Senior Editor Pat Verbal · Associate Editors Chonda Ralston and D. Christopher Ralston, Ph.D.  
Assistant Editors Rebecca Olson and Rachel Olstad

Cover Illustration: Hyatt Moore is an international artist who has written and designed a number of books, including *In Search of the Source* and *In the Image of God*. He has been executive director of Wycliffe Bible Translation USA and has also served in Guatemala, Papua New Guinea, and Canada. Moore & Moore Art, Dana Point, California, [www.hyattmoore.com](http://www.hyattmoore.com).

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We owe a deep debt of gratitude to a gifted group of experienced men and women who contributed outstanding professional papers in their various fields of expertise. Their wise counsel and support have made this course possible and this book a reality. Thank you!

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The Christian Institute on Disability  
Joni and Friends International Disability Center  
P.O. Box 3333, Agoura Hills, California 91376-3333  
Email: [cid@joniandfriends.org](mailto:cid@joniandfriends.org)  
Phone: 818-707-5664  
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Dear Friends,

Welcome to this *Beyond Suffering* Seminar designed especially for busy pastors and leaders who care about how the church touches *all* people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps you've heard that the numbers of people with disabilities are growing around the world and many of them do not have a church family. In the U.S. alone nearly 65 million people are affected by disability, and their circle of influence is significant in every neighborhood. The need is great! This introductory training will inspire you to lead your congregation into deeper ministry to families looking for love and acceptance.

Whether you are a senior pastor, children's pastor, lay leader or volunteer, you may be called upon to address some of life's hardest questions about suffering and disability from a biblical perspective. These four lessons lay the foundation for beginning or expanding your ministry to those affected by disability – bringing them into the body of Christ as Jesus intended when he said, "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. . . . that my house will be full" (Luke 14:21, 23). Jesus has already given us the mandate, and once you get started, you'll discover the rich blessings these friends with disabilities bring to your church.

Our prayer at Joni and Friends is that God will inspire you through this first step to encourage others in your congregation to take the complete, 16-lesson course—*Beyond Suffering: A Christian View on Disability Ministry*. For more information visit [www.joniandfriends.org/BYS](http://www.joniandfriends.org/BYS) and look for additional resources in the back of this book. Joni and Friends also has Area Ministries throughout the country, which are uniquely qualified to assist your church's growing disability ministry.

In His Service,

Steve Bundy  
Vice President  
Christian Institute on Disability





# What Is *Beyond Suffering*?

*Beyond Suffering: An Introduction for Christian Leaders* is designed to serve as a starting point for pastors and leaders seeking a better understanding of God's plan for disability and suffering. The original, groundbreaking *Beyond Suffering: A Christian View on Disability Ministry* course is rooted in Jesus' command in Luke 14 and his mandate to include people with disability in God's family.

*Beyond Suffering* has been translated into several languages and embraced by national and international audiences, as well as Bible colleges, universities and seminaries interested in offering courses to equip students in disability ministry. The comprehensive 16-lesson study guide is organized into four modules designed to give Christians a solid understanding of the main issues involved in various aspects of disability ministry:

- An Overview of Disability Ministry
- The Theology of Suffering and Disability
- The Church and Disability Ministry
- An Introduction to Bioethics

As a leader, people look to you for answers. This course will help you better understand how human brokenness reveals humanity's universal need for grace, and equip you to impact future generations as Christians change the way they think about suffering and become beacons of hope for the disability community.

*"I have been deeply involved in research revealing the tremendous void in the Christian church toward the suffering and disabled. . . . The CID offers resources with a biblical view of our responsibility for developing and implementing a significant suffering and disability ministry."*

D R. L A R R Y J. W A T E R S ,

Associate Professor of Bible Exposition, Dallas Theological Seminary

You can learn more about translations and course options, including online training, or watch the introductory video at [www.joniandfriends.org/BYS](http://www.joniandfriends.org/BYS).



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# About This Book's Symbols



**READ:**

This symbol indicates that there is a paper to read at the end of the session.



**VIEW:**

This symbol indicates that there is a video to view, which is available at [www.gaa.joniandfriends.org](http://www.gaa.joniandfriends.org).

# The Christian Institute on Disability

## Courses for a Cause that Impact the Culture for Christ

Whether you are interested in pursuing an advanced course of study in disability ministry, or gaining a Christian perspective on complex bioethical issues, or simply wanting to practice “Christianity with its sleeves rolled up” among people with disabilities, you’ll find plenty of guidance, support, and training at the Christian Institute on Disability (CID). Our vice president and managing director, Steve Bundy, and his staff stand ready to serve you.

Disability ministry is a growing movement. A Christ-centered education would not be complete without a theology of suffering and disability. A biblical worldview that is shaped by a theology of suffering and disability is one that keeps us in touch with the God who lifts up the most vulnerable. This is a human issue. It is a global issue. It is a gospel issue. It is an issue that is essential to any Christian institution of higher education that claims theology as its governing discipline. It is relevant to every major discipline offered in higher education. At the Christian Institute on Disability, a student will learn and experience some of the most important aspects of the Christian life through our many programs and internship opportunities.

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**Courses:** Our courses are rich and diverse. The CID provides learning opportunities on a wide range of subjects related to a theology of suffering and disability. The content is nothing short of life-changing, appropriate for any serious follower of Christ.

**Cause:** Our cause is to draw attention to the needs of those who are most vulnerable around the world. Many live with disability and very few have access to the care they desperately need, especially those who live in developing countries. Worldwide, people with disabilities are much more likely to face poverty, social isolation, slavery, sex trafficking, and discrimination of every kind. Our cause is for their lives—to meet their physical and spiritual needs in the name of our Savior.

**Cultural Change:** Our ultimate goal is to bring about cultural transformation for Christ. Whether on college campuses, in churches or in the wider culture, our aim is to transform hearts and minds by giving students life-giving truth.

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**What the CID offers universities and seminaries.** . . . The Christian Institute on Disability is the academic arm of the Joni and Friends International Disability Center. The CID comes alongside educational institutions in course development in theology, ministry, missions and advocacy as it relates to suffering and disability. The CID currently works with faculty in the departments of theology, education, social work, law, nursing, engineering and other disciplines.

**What the CID offers students.** . . . Students receive a biblical view on suffering and disability while gaining hands-on ministry experience. Courses are offered through collaboration with universities, seminaries or at the International Disability Center. Courses are taught on campuses and online. In working with educational institutions, the CID integrates its three departments of knowledge and experience: Education and Training, Public Policy, and Global Missions & Internships.

### Education and Training

The CID Education and Training department prepares disability leaders and ministers in the church, parachurch and educational institutions to evangelize, include and empower those affected by disability. The CID partners with Christian universities and seminaries around the world to offer programs and course work designed to equip new generations of leaders for effective disability ministry.

### Public Policy Center

Human life can now be copied and replicated, altered and aborted, cloned and euthanized, patented and redefined. The CID Public Policy Center brings together theologians, ethicists, educators, doctors and attorneys to address hotly debated disability-related issues such as physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia and stem cell research. The goal is to draw on the expertise of many Christian professionals to present a clear, reasonable and biblically-based perspective on these issues. The Christian Institute on Disability is currently accomplishing this through the media, the church and other public and Christian institutions.

### Cause 4 Life Global Missions and Internships

Experiential learning through hands-on ministry equips the next generation through the Cause 4 Life Global Missions and Internships. Our internships provide a structured learning experience whereby interns receive education and training in disability ministry while serving and witnessing to those who are marginalized and forgotten. Students put into practice the very things they have learned in the classroom, solidifying the educational experience and bringing transformation of heart and mind.

*Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

*Proverbs 31:9*

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# Why Churches Need a Disability Ministry

Perhaps you have never attended a church with an active disability ministry and you're wondering: *Is this relevant to my personal call to ministry? What can my church do in this area—and where do we begin?*

The *Beyond Suffering* course is designed to answer these questions and provide you with a flexible road map for getting started. Here are some good reasons your church should embrace disability ministry.

First, disability is no respecter of persons. It affects people of all ages, races, nationalities, and ethnicity. According to the World Health Organization, more than one billion people in the world are affected with some kind of disability. Rest assured that there are already members of your church who are impacted by disability, in one way or another. Your call to shepherding includes these friends, just as it did for Jesus during his time on earth. In this course, we explore some of the major kinds of disability, their key characteristics and causes, as well as the various ways disability can affect individual and family life.

Second, people with disabilities can easily be misunderstood, devalued, and deeply wounded—even in the church. Whether through myths perpetuated by popular media, or attitudes rooted in various worldviews, people with disabilities have not always fared well in our society. Sadly, even some churches have been complicit in this mistreatment. As Christians we can be on the vanguard of a movement to promote awareness and reverse this trend. *Beyond Suffering* offers some historical perspective on the treatment of people with disabilities and identifies God's plan for suffering and disability.

Finally, and most importantly, churches should have a disability ministry because our Lord commanded it and modeled it in his own earthly ministry. As you'll see throughout this course, the mandate to "go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame... so that my house will be full"<sup>1</sup> is at the very heart of the church's mission. Christians are called to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with all people,<sup>2</sup> work to alleviate suffering,<sup>3</sup> mediate structural change in groups and organizations,<sup>4</sup> stand up for social justice,<sup>5</sup> facilitate individual spiritual growth,<sup>6</sup> change society for the better,<sup>7</sup> and love for love's sake.<sup>8</sup> Disability ministry involves all of these elements and more. In *Beyond Suffering*, we help you discover a variety of ways in which you can make a difference in the lives of people affected by disability, on a local, national, and even international scale.

If suffering and disability play a key role in God's plan for his people and the world, as we see in scripture, then we cannot afford to ignore this clarion call to action. The winds of change are blowing, bringing a movement poised to storm the doors of the church with such radical inclusion that every man, woman, and child with special needs will come to know, love and serve Jesus Christ—and, quite possibly, change the world along the way.

Since disability ministry has a special place in God's heart, it cannot be optional for the church. *Beyond Suffering* offers a road map for getting your church started on this exciting journey.



**READ:** "God's Story of Disability: The Unfolding Plan from Genesis to Revelation"  
by Dr. Dave Deuel (See page 21)



# Theology of Suffering & Disability

Take a mental stroll through a major bookstore in your area. Picture the towering displays of hot-off-the-press bestsellers written by movers and shakers who claim to have new, bold ideas. For only \$39.99 you can take a book home or simply download it onto your phone or computer. But in the first century, notable writings were circulated on handwritten scrolls and read aloud in public assemblies. We can assume, however, that Luke's gospel was not well received by the Jews of his day. Why? Because Luke's fresh idea declared that the Jews had the message of God's kingdom completely backward. This page-turner announced Jesus to be the Son of God *and* the Son of Man, who humbled the proud and honored the lowly.

Luke, a beloved doctor, was uniquely qualified to write the Book of Luke because he was a man of education and culture—a Syrian of Antioch, not a Jew. As such, he readily observed the chasm between the Jews and Gentiles. Luke's medical knowledge and experience also made him a man of compassion, acquainted with suffering, yet appreciative of beauty and philosophy. No doubt Luke and the Apostle Paul spent hours in lively discourse during their missionary journeys recorded in the Book of Acts. They both cared deeply about the outcasts in society, but Luke is the one who brought us stories of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33), the Publican (18:13), the Prodigal Son (15:11-24), and the Thief on the Cross (23:43).

No other gospel writer captures Jesus' heart for people affected by disability as well as Luke. Five out of the six miracles he records are about healing.<sup>1</sup> In this session, we'll focus on what Christians in the disability movement call "The Luke 14 Mandate" and seek to understand its significance to a biblical theology of suffering and disability.

## SESSION One



### OBJECTIVES

Studying this session  
will help you:

- ✓ Describe an overview of the gospel of Luke and its significance to the topic of suffering and disability.
- ✓ Explain the Luke 14 Mandate and its implications in ministry among people with disabilities.
- ✓ Appreciate the implications of Luke's gospel in understanding the rest of the New Testament's teaching on suffering and disability.
- ✓ Understand the Luke 14 Mandate.



## Hospitality

Who doesn't enjoy a glitzy party? But for contemporary Christians there is danger in climbing the popular party ladder. It is easy to bestow gifts on those who can reciprocate and invite those who will return the favor. Such thinking can lock believers into the worldly social order, driven by insecurity and saturated with a drive for status. It's a false scene with distorted values. In Luke 14 Jesus cuts through this system of mutual hospitality and opens our hearts to God's realities and rewards.

### I. Luke's Concentration on the Kingdom of God<sup>2</sup>

According to Scripture, Jesus came into this world to give his life for the salvation of sinners, to destroy the works of the Devil and to reveal the Father.<sup>3</sup> This third objective is most pointedly displayed in Luke's description of Jesus' humanity and compassion for people from all walks of life, backgrounds and ethnicities, especially those with disabilities. When Jesus walked the earth, he radiated the true character of the Father. Luke's gospel reveals Christ as the fulfillment of all that was promised in the Law, the Prophets and the Writings.<sup>4</sup> Luke opens the lens through which we come to understand God's full nature as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and his compassion toward outcasts and sinners. He also anticipates the ministry and mission of the church, beginning with the Messianic Prophecies.<sup>5</sup>

#### A. Messianic Prophecies Found in Luke and Acts

Luke makes at least 32 references to Messianic Prophecies, many of which have to do with Christ's ministry to the Gentiles, the broken and outcast.

1. Ministry to the Gentiles—Luke 3:4-6
2. Light to the Gentiles—Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47-48, 26:23
3. Invitation to all—Acts 13:34
4. God's Spirit poured out on all—Acts 2:16-21
5. Inclusion of Gentiles in the church—Acts 15:16-17
6. Jews' rejection of the gospel, Gentiles' acceptance of it—Acts 13:40-41
7. Ministry to the broken—Luke 4:16-21

#### B. Major Themes in the Gospel of Luke

Luke's overarching theme is clear throughout the text as he declares that Jesus is the Savior of all regardless of ethnicity, gender or socioeconomic status. Luke's secondary themes are:

- **Salvation for All People:** With a special focus on outcasts and sinners (Luke 2:10-11, 19:10).
- **The Holy Spirit:** No gospel writer mentions the work of the Holy Spirit more often than Luke (Luke 1:15, 35, 41, 2:25-35).

- **Prayer:** In many instances throughout the book, Jesus is praying (Luke 5:15, 9:18, 11:1).
- **Recording Christian History:** Luke's intent was to write salvation history. Taken together, Luke and Acts display the sovereign work of the Lord in bringing salvation to the ends of the earth.
- **Jerusalem:** Though Luke is considered the gospel to the Gentiles, Jerusalem is of central importance to him. Jesus resolutely sets out for Jerusalem to fulfill his earthly destiny (Luke 13:22).
- **Stewardship of Material Possessions:** Throughout his gospel, Luke emphasized that Christ's disciples are not to store up treasures for themselves on Earth (Luke 12:13-21, 16:19-31).
- **Women and their Role in Christ's Ministry:** No other gospel mentions the role of women more often than Luke (Luke 1-2, 7:36-50, 8:1-3, 13:10-17).

### C. Jesus' Teachings in the Shadow of the Cross

*If you knew that you only had a short time to live, what message would you most want to leave with your family and friends?*

**READ:** Luke 13:10-35 and Luke 14:1-14

Imagine yourself standing among the crowds listening to Jesus tell stories with powerful truths. In each of these passages Jesus begins with a healing on the Sabbath, followed by two parables and finally concludes with a narrative concerning who will or will not enter the kingdom of God.

Who understood Jesus' message? What things were most important to him as he approached his death on the cross?

## II. The Luke 14 Mandate: A Closer Look

The Luke 14 Mandate is more than an open invitation to come to God's banquet table or to fill up Christ's church. It is the definition of God's kingdom on earth as it applies to Christ's universal church and what is yet to come in heaven. It is the kingdom's door swung open for all—the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, and people with or without disabilities.

In Luke 13 and 14 Jesus spends time away from the urban markets of Jerusalem and in villages where common, country folk resided. But even there he finds religious leaders who are increasingly jealous of him and his so-called kingdom. Jesus clearly shows that no person or community is too small or insignificant for his ministry (nor for ours).

Rev. Dan'l Markham writes about the climax of these two conflicting kingdoms and the importance of the Parable of the Great Banquet. Markham notes:

Jesus' teaching in Luke 14:1-24 comes at the climax of a running debate between Jesus and Israel's religious leaders, revealing their increasing jealousy and hatred for him, highlighting two kingdoms in conflict—one religious, i.e. self-serving, legalistic, judgmental, power hungry, money hungry, and insensitive to human need. The other is the kingdom of God, guided by mercy, justice, faith, righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17; Mt. 23:23)... The ultimate prize of the two kingdoms in conflict is the number of souls whose destiny becomes eternally entwined with Christ the King.<sup>6</sup>

### A. The Contrasts and Reversals of the Kingdom

Steve Bundy, Vice President of the Christian Institute on Disability at Joni and Friends, travels nationally and internationally teaching in churches, colleges and seminaries. He regularly observes the lack of understanding regarding the kingdom of God among believers, including those in the clergy. In Bundy's paper "The Kingdom of God and Disability," he explains the importance of the contrasts and reversals found in Luke 14. In this session, we will closely examine three of these reversals, which ask these important questions:

- Who is the greatest in the kingdom?
- Are you part of the kingdom?
- What is the community of the kingdom?



**READ:** "The Kingdom of God and Disability: A Commentary on Luke 14:1-24"  
by Rev. Steve Bundy (See page 29)

### B. Who Is the Greatest in the Kingdom? Luke 14:7-11

1. In the parable Jesus told in Luke 14:7-11, what opportunities did the guests miss out on when they chose the honored seats for themselves?
2. Who makes the final decision regarding seats of honor?

The irony here cannot be overlooked. Jesus has just healed a man with a disability who was not invited to the meal. Rather than celebrating with this man over a miraculous intervention by inviting him to the table, the guests tried to gain recognition for themselves by claiming the best seats. The guests missed the opportunity to reverse the social segregation that this newly-healed man had experienced due to his disability. Jesus' actions claimed this man for the kingdom, reversing religious traditions.

Jesus likely chose a wedding feast as his example because places of honor were more clearly delineated there than at a meal in a Pharisee's house. The parable provided a segue for Jesus' teaching on whom to invite to a feast and the importance of the host's final decision in the seating arrangements. As we saw in the parable in Luke 13, God is the host who assigns seats of honor in his kingdom.

3. What virtue was missing in the hearts of these guests?

The problem of this group was not a problem of knowledge, but of the heart. Though they knew full well the teaching of Scripture, they were full of pride and arrogance. Jesus ended his parable with these words, "*For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted*" (Luke 14:11). This is very similar to his conclusion in Luke 13:30, "*Those who are last will be first and the first will be last.*" In the minds of these religious leaders, the man with a disability was last, and they were first. But in the words of the Master Teacher, this is not so in the kingdom of God.

### C. What Is the Nature of the Kingdom? Luke 14:12-14

In this section Jesus turns his attention to the host. Speaking directly to him, Jesus gives what may be the most descriptive explanation of the nature of God's kingdom found in the entire

Book of Luke. Similar to his pattern in Luke 13, Jesus moves from ministry to those with disabilities (vs. 1-6), to a lifestyle of humility, which places others first (vs. 7-11), to a lifestyle of including the disabled, the Gentiles, the poor and outcast. He concludes with an eschatological view of the kingdom.

Jesus instructs the host using a personal pronoun: “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind” (Luke 14:13).<sup>7</sup> Jesus also made his commission personal to the host of a luncheon or dinner in the earlier verse. This is a clear instruction to the church to include people with disabilities in both our personal lives, as well as in our faith communities.

- His first commission is to us, individually. If our lives are to reflect the kingdom of God, we must live our King’s lifestyle, inclusive of those with disabilities.
- His second commission in Luke 14:15-24 is to the church as the representative of God’s kingdom, which we’ll discuss in the next session.

When Jesus uses both of the terms *luncheon* and *dinner*, he is indicating a comprehensiveness that encompasses one’s overall hospitality. In other words, Jesus doesn’t suggest this commission applies only for special occasions. We should be including people from outside of our comfort zones and traditional associations, those we may consider “lowly” as part of our day-to-day lives. Jesus goes so far as to name people on a typical Pharisee’s guest list: “*friends, brothers, relatives and rich neighbors*” (Luke 14:12).

1. What does this text say about the church’s understanding of the nature of the kingdom?
2. If the kingdom is one in which those with disabilities have a seat of honor, how can the church honor the King’s heart for the overlooked in our society?

Author and Pastor John Piper observed that even the most faithful followers of Jesus must fight the natural tendency toward reciprocity. In a sermon he delivered one Thanksgiving Sunday, Piper addressed the Luke 14 Mandate:

There is in every human heart a terrible and powerful tendency to live by the law of earthly repayment, the law of reciprocity. There is a subtle and relentless inclination in our flesh to do what will make life as comfortable as possible and to avoid what will inconvenience us or agitate our placid routine or add the least bit of tension to our Thanksgiving dinner. The most sanctified people among us must do battle every day so as not to be enslaved by the universal tendency to always act for the greatest earthly payoff.

The people who lightly dismiss this text as a rhetorical overstatement are probably blind to the impossibility of overstating the corruption of the human heart and its deceptive power to make us think all is well when we are enslaved to the law of reciprocity, the law which says: always do what will pay off in convenience, undisturbed pleasures, domestic comfort and social tranquility. Jesus’ words are radical because our sin is radical. He waves a red flag because there is destruction ahead for people governed by the law of reciprocity... Why does it make such an eternal difference whom you invite to Thanksgiving dinner? It... reveals where our treasure is. Is Jesus, with His commands and promises, more valuable to us than tradition and convenience and earthly comfort? Is He our treasure or is the world? That question is not decided during an invitation at church. It is decided at Thanksgiving dinner, and hour by hour every day by whether we are willing



to inconvenience ourselves for those who can't repay or whether we avoid them and so preserve our placid routine. It matters whom you invite to Thanksgiving dinner because it matters where your treasure is.<sup>8</sup>

This mandate of including people with disabilities is not simply a ministry of benevolence. Though they may have limited financial means, the church will be blessed as a result of their inclusion. Though the Pharisees viewed reciprocity in terms of what they could anticipate receiving from those with riches and influence, make no mistake about it—people with disabilities are also able to repay with their presence and lives. In Luke 14:14 we find that not only will there be an earthly blessing, but a heavenly one as well: “...*you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.*” As William Hendriksen comments, “What minister cannot bear testimony to the fact that some of the finest lessons he ever learned were given to him by the poor... the small, the sick, the handicapped, the dying?”<sup>9</sup>

#### **D. The Great Banquet – Who Fills the Seats at the Table? Luke 14:15-24**

1. What did the Jews at the table expect the coming kingdom to reflect?
2. What were Jesus' expectations of the coming kingdom?

As Luke creates dialectic between human responsibility and God's priorities of grace and initiative, we once again see an emphasis on parallels in chapters 13 and 14 with a focus on contrast and reversal. The reversal here is of the expectation of those who experience the earthly ministry of Jesus and expect to be present at the banquet of the eschatological kingdom.<sup>10</sup>

As soon as Jesus brought up the resurrection of the righteous, someone at the table jumped on the topic of the feast in the kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup> From the context and Jesus' response, it is clear that the tone of the one speaking was quite pious. Yet, having just been rebuked by Jesus over not caring for those with disabilities and the outcasts, this guest tried to restate his (and the other guests') position in the Great Banquet of the kingdom. This only added fuel to Jesus' fire. His response seemed to go something like this: “You want to talk about the kingdom? Okay, let's talk about the kingdom.” Jesus then launched into a parable that is unmistakably a climactic point in his gospel.

In Chapters 13 and 14 Jesus had already...

- ministered to two persons with disabilities
- twice rebuked religious leaders for their hypocrisy and greater concern for their animals and personal affairs than for the outcast children of God—all in his name
- foretold of Gentiles and outsiders becoming “insiders” in the kingdom of God and “insiders” becoming outsiders
- communicated that a kingdom lifestyle, which they claimed to represent, was a lifestyle of inclusion of those with disabilities

Jesus then throws the final punch! All he had been teaching up to this point was simply a reflection of the kingdom to come. To his audience, a discussion of the feast in the kingdom of God had a clear meaning. The Jews viewed the Messianic kingdom of God in all its fullness as that of a great banquet, with lavish amounts of food, drink and fellowship, with God ultimately ruling all the earth, including the Gentiles:

“On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best meats and the finest wines” (Isa. 25:6; see also Ps. 23:5; Matt. 8:11-12; 22:1; 26:29; Mark 14:25; Rev. 3:20; 19:9).

Turning to the self-righteous pious man, Jesus used a parable to reiterate what he had already told them about seats of honor and guest lists. He said the feast of the kingdom that the Jews had put such self-confidence in would be filled with those he had listed in Luke 14:23.

In those days, it was not uncommon for a host to first invite a great number of guests to a banquet and then send a reminder. The story does not indicate that any had declined the first invitation, so they were expected to attend once the banquet was prepared. As the host eagerly waited for his guests to arrive and enjoy the well-prepared feast, his servant returned with the message that no one was coming. It was as if they were of one mind not to participate in the banquet.

Luke makes it clear that they *“began with one (consent) to excuse themselves all.”*<sup>12</sup> As Alfred Plummer comments, “There was no variation; it was like a prearranged conspiracy: They all pleaded that they were at present too much occupied to come. And there was not a single exception.”<sup>13</sup> Not one of the excuses given was a legitimate excuse that would justify disgracing the host. What a powerful analogy for those who will not partake of this great eschatological feast! It is as if something in their hearts led them to conspire together to hide behind excuses in order to avoid honoring the host, or, in this case, “The Host of hosts, King of kings and Lord of lords.”

Throughout the parable Jesus spoke from the perspective of the host. As he ended the parable, however, it is clear in Luke 14:24 that Jesus switched from the perspective of the host to himself, speaking directly to those present: *“I tell to you (plural).”* Jesus made it a personal address to those listening: *you* are the guests who made excuses; those who did *not* make excuses are the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame (v. 21).

When the host became angry at the excuses, he ordered his servant to go out into the streets and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. The servant had to go past the downtown urban homes and into the alleys where one would find beggars who were poor and disabled. Notice the segregation of those with disabilities from the mainstream—the servant had to go out past the neighborhoods, hotels, schools and even the synagogues to find the disabled. The master told the servant to *“bring them in.”* Hendriksen observes:

This was probably necessary, not so much because, for example, the blind would not have been able to find the banqueting hall unless they were taken by the hand and led, but rather because all of the groups here mentioned might well entertain serious doubts with respect to the question whether a sumptuous banquet could really be for them.<sup>14</sup>

The servant was told to *“make them come in”* (Luke 14:23). The language conveys a strong urging or compelling, something that was necessary for them. The host desired that his house be full of people who were poor, crippled, blind and lame; he would not start the banquet until they were all gathered in and had a place at the table. Those who in the comfort of their lifestyle and self-confidence made excuses would in no way participate in the banquet. But for those with disabilities and the outcast, the host made it clear: the kingdom was made up of *“the least of these brothers of mine”* (Matt. 25:40).

### III. Hosting a Luke 14 Banquet

One of the disability models that Joni and Friends recommends to churches is the Luke 14 Banquet.<sup>15</sup> It is a great outreach to the disability community and builds relationships between volunteers and families in your church. This idea also follows the principle of Isaiah 58:7-8 which says, *“Is it not to share*

*your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him... Then your light will break forth like the dawn... your righteousness will go before you and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.*” Here is how to host a banquet in your church:

Design a banquet in the manner of Luke 14. Recruit volunteers to prepare food and decorate tables. Design centerpieces for the tables and create small gift baskets. Then, invite a set number of people with disabilities and their families to attend. After dinner, give away door prizes or gift certificates. Hold a short program highlighting someone’s testimony. Declare the gospel at the close of the banquet.

**LISTEN TO:** “The Banquet Table” by Joni Eareckson Tada,  
a Joni and Friends Radio Feature <http://www.joniandfriends.org/banquet-table/>

Jesus’ teachings on Luke 14 were radical and revolutionary not only for his day, but continue to challenge Christians today. He reverses our fundamental human value systems and calls us to lives of courtesy, hospitality and radical inclusion. This is not simply good advice that makes nice people nicer. This is living out one’s faith in such a way that it exemplifies the saving rule of God through which mankind comes to repentance and faith. When our daily lives reflect the attitude and behavior of Jesus himself, we can say like the Apostle Paul, “Follow me as I follow Christ.”<sup>16</sup>

## Reflections on Session 1

### Theology of Suffering & Disability

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1. In the shadow of the cross, what teachings were central in Jesus’ mind?
2. What is the Luke 14 Mandate?
3. Why is an understanding of kingdom reversals and contrasts so critical to a Christian’s core values, as well as those of the church?
4. What implications do Luke 13 and 14 have for a theology of suffering and disability?
5. What can we assume from the parable of the Great Banquet about the final Wedding Supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19:7-9?
6. Describe a time in your life when you have truly lived out Jesus’ message of the parable of The Great Banquet.



# God's Story of Disability: The Unfolding Plan from Genesis to Revelation

By Dr. Dave Deuel

God has a story. From Genesis to Revelation, salvation history displays the plans of God's heart, his mission. The story includes disabilities, because disabilities play pivotal roles in God's mission to bring people to himself. Familiarly, his glory and our worship are at the very center. Although entire books have been written on small details of disability in Scripture, the entire story from creation to eternity needs to be told. It is, at heart, the gospel of Jesus Christ, and a basis for praise. In our study, we explore the Bible's perspective on disability as it develops in salvation history.

Although references to disability are scattered throughout Scripture, perhaps surprisingly, the topic does not appear prominently. In fact, when compared with many other matters, the Bible offers little to say directly about disability.<sup>1</sup> One reason is that God wove his heart's concern and tender care for those with disabilities into the fabric of society. It did not stand out because it was commonplace. But Scripture also gives us encouraging insight into God's provision for people with disabilities whom he loves.<sup>2</sup>

## God Gave Us a Beginning Without Disability (Genesis-Exodus)

### 1. In the Beginning, There Was No Disability.

When God's created couple, Adam and Eve, first willfully disobeyed him, sin entered the world and brought pain, suffering, disability, and even death with it (Gen. 3:1-24). Scripture calls this painful reality "the curse" (Rev. 22:3). It is very important to remember that people have disabilities because of the curse on all creation. Even the animal kingdom has disabilities.

### 2. As Creator, God Assumes Responsibility for Disabilities.

Responsibility means that God is not just the cause, but the upholder, enabler, and final rescuer of people with disabilities. Now that *is* responsibility! This perspective differs considerably from simply blaming God for disability, which would be serious error. When Moses wanted to explain to God why he was incapable of serving him due to some inability in his speech, the Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?" (Exod. 4:11).<sup>3</sup> This verse not only addresses God's role in disabilities, it also sets the stage for his provision *through* his people.

Although greatly disappointing, it is important to survey the disability perspective of other people in the ancient world before we focus on God's people. Among Israel's neighbors, perspectives on disabilities varied considerably. Treatment ranged from completely rejecting and mistreating people with disabilities to worshiping them. Sadly, rejection was the norm. Most babies with disabilities were left to die by exposure shortly after birth. If they survived they were treated as outcasts and consigned to a miserable life of begging, prostitution and in general, being taken advantage of. Usually, they suffered a premature death. It was anyone's worst nightmare.

The other extreme for persons born with a disability was that they might be worshipped as supernatural beings due primarily to their abnormal behavior or appearance. At least one Egyptian king with a

disability was worshipped for having a condition that left him disfigured. Rather than a poverty-stricken social outcast, he was pampered, but still an outcast. Whether rejected completely or worshipped, people with disabilities were not accepted. Both the rejection and the worship resulted from an incorrect understanding of what caused disabilities. In the early period which some call ‘pre-scientific,’ those who rejected the one true God did not understand the true causes of disabilities. The ancients typically blamed disabilities on sins or offenses to their gods. With this reasoning, people with disabilities or their parents suffered because of something they had done wrong.

God’s people differed considerably from their contemporaries in their understanding of the causes of disability and their treatment of persons with disabilities.<sup>4</sup> Although most did not understand disabilities from scientific perspectives any better than their neighbors who rejected God, they reasoned that God cared about all people, disabled or not, and so should they. In fact, God was so concerned about people with disabilities that he asked his people Israel to help those not able to help themselves. From the earliest days of God’s people, his focus was on seeing the entire community grow spiritually to become committed worshipers.

### 3. As God’s Creatures, We Groan with Pain and Sadness for Disability to be Healed.

Disability is a high price of living in a sin-cursed world. Paul reminds us that all creation, including people with disabilities, “groan” in suffering as we wait for perfect redemption (Rom. 8:19-25). Regardless of how blessed we appear, we are all still in pain this side of Heaven. But we also know that “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). That calling includes disability.

## God’s Gracious Law Makes Provision for Disability (Exodus-Deuteronomy)

### 1. God’s People Need Protection by His Law.

People with disabilities were considered part of the larger group called “the needy” or “the afflicted,” and linked with vulnerability and poverty. This included the mentally challenged who were judged by their loss of self-control.<sup>5</sup> The group encompassed those who might pass in and out of disability status several times in their lives and acknowledged God’s sovereign hand was involved in giving and removing the disability. In fact, everyone entered this category sooner or later if they lived to old age.<sup>6</sup>

### 2. God Tells His People in His Law to Care for Those with Disabilities.

This included punishing those who oppress individuals with disabilities and rewarding those who rescue and assist them. God’s Word describes compassion for the people with disabilities within the charter of Israel. For example, “You shall not curse a deaf man, nor place a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall revere your God; I am the LORD” (Lev. 19:14). Notice that obeying this command is an expression of fearing God. One law places a curse upon the one who mistreats a person with a disability: “Cursed is he who misleads a blind person on the road. And all the people shall say, ‘Amen’” (Deut. 27:18). The mistreatment of a person with a disability was deserving of severe punishment. That is because God loves them and cares for them.

### 3. Job and David Follow the Law by Caring for People with Disability.

Scripture presents them as righteous for their faithfulness. In declaring his innocence before his accusers, Job explained to them that he had kept God’s law, which required compassionate treatment toward those people who were disabled. He said, “I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame” (Job 29:15). This meant he had helped those who were sight-impaired and unable to walk without difficulty due to their disabilities.





In so doing Job compassionately participated in God's plan for persons with disabilities, as did others like him.

Similarly, King David assisted Mephibosheth, a young man who was unable to walk because he was dropped as a baby (2 Sam. 4:4). His father was Jonathan, a friend to whom David had pledged his faithfulness. David kept his commitment by showing compassion and caring for this young man: "So Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he ate at the king's table regularly. Now he was lame in both feet" (2 Sam. 9:13). Notice that David not only offered basic care to Mephibosheth, he brought him to his table as one would a family member. This was more than kindness.

## God's Prophets Promise Future Hope for Disability (Isaiah-Malachi)

### 1. God Will Establish the Persons with Disabilities whom He Has Afflicted.

When we look at passages which deal with future things, we once again find that people with disabilities became recipients of God's healing—in part because he demonstrates his greatness through healing them. "In that day, declares the Lord, I will assemble the lame, and gather the outcasts, even those whom I have afflicted" (Mic. 4:6). This passage reminds us that God assumes responsibility for disability. It also assures us he will heal them. Other passages show us God's hand of kindness in restoring persons with disabilities: "The LORD opens the eyes of the blind..." (Ps. 146:8).

Some passages look forward to a great and future day when God will right all wrongs and reverse the effects of the curse (Rev. 22:3). This grand event is described in terms of God restoring sight and hearing: "And on that day the deaf shall hear words of a book. And out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see" (Isa. 29:18).<sup>7</sup> Again, "Behold I am bringing them from the north country, And I will gather them from the remote parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame" (Jer. 31:8). In beautiful poetic language befitting the occasion of final healing, "Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy, for waters will break forth in the wilderness and streams in the Arabah" (Isa. 35:6). And finally, "I will make the lame a remnant, and the outcasts a strong nation, And the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion from now on and forever" (Mic. 4:7). God's future plans for persons with disabilities offer healing and comfort now.

### 2. God Will One Day Deliver Persons with Disabilities from Oppressors.

God seeks retribution for violating the laws against misusing people with disabilities. God promises to rescue people who are disabled from those who take advantage of them. "Behold, I am going to deal at that time with all your oppressors, I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will turn their shame into praise and renown in all the earth" (Zeph. 3:19). The shame spoken of is not only due to sinning against God, but also to inexcusable social rejection and mistreatment of people with disabilities. For all those who have abused God's children with disabilities, God warns of justice and punishment.

## Jesus Offers Hope and a Way for Disability (Matthew-Revelation)

When Jesus came to Earth, in addition to dying on the cross for sin, his mission was to repair the effects of the curse and fulfill what the law commanded. He revealed what wisdom prescribed and the prophets had predicted for persons with disabilities. As his commissioned agents, we continue the work he began. Yet many are surprised to discover that part of God's plan for people with disabilities was to not only glorify

Jesus, but also to minister to others—not just *in* their disabilities, but *because of* them. How do people with disabilities minister to others? The simple answer is they serve others in many ways, but first in their need. Seems ironic doesn't it? Their needs provide opportunities for individuals or groups to serve God through caring for them. How does this work?

## 1. People with Disabilities Allow Jesus to Show Compassion, Bring Glory to God, and Demonstrate that He Is God's Son, the Messiah.

**A. *Jesus Had Compassion on People with Disabilities.*** “And moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed him” (Matt. 20:34). And again, “*And moved with compassion*, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I am willing, be cleansed’” (Mark 1:42, emphasis added). The Bible calls these miracles “the mighty acts of God” or “the works of God.” When questioned about the purpose of healing a blind man, Jesus responded that it was “in order that *the works of God* might be displayed in him” (John 9:1-3). In Jesus healing persons with disabilities, God’s mighty acts are personalized and put on display for all to see in the perfect example of personal compassion and fair treatment.

**B. *Jesus Brought Glory to God by Healing Persons with Disabilities.*** In response to Jesus’ exercising compassion by healing people with disabilities, the multitudes praised God. They glorified God because Jesus showed compassion to persons with disabilities as part of God the Father’s will. “Large crowds came to him. They brought blind people and those who could not walk. They also brought disabled people, those who could not speak and many others. They laid them at his feet, and he healed them. The people were amazed. ... So the people praised the God of Israel” (Matt. 15:30-31, *NIRV*).<sup>8</sup> When Jesus healed people with disabilities, it brought glory to God.

**C. *Jesus Demonstrated that He Is God by Healing People with Disabilities.*** One day, when John the Baptist sent messengers to ask Jesus if he was God, the Messiah, Jesus pointed immediately to his miracles on behalf of those who needed help as proof: “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Luke 7:22). The fact that disabilities are included with fatal diseases and harmful poverty demonstrates that Jesus, as God, desires to restore those affected by disabilities along with all other devastating effects of the curse. The end result is “creation-quality” conditions. Tim Keller said it well in his book, *The Prodigal Son*, “Jesus’ miracles were not so much violations of the natural order, but a restoration of the natural order. God did not create a world with blindness...”<sup>9</sup>

## 2. People with Disabilities Give Jesus an Opportunity to Correct Wrong Ideas about God's Love and Human Suffering.

***Myth: God Does Not Love People with Disabilities.*** This notion is a carryover from pagan beliefs. But the Bible makes it clear that a disability is not God’s disapproval or punishment upon individuals who are disabled. He allows disabilities for his intended purposes; to bring glory to himself, spiritual growth in people with disabilities, and ministry opportunity and blessings for believers who serve the disability community.

***Myth: People with Disabilities or Their Parents Sinned against God.*** One example of this wrong idea is a question that someone asked Jesus regarding whether it was a person with a disability or his parents who sinned. Jesus responded “neither” and explained that the disability existed “in order that



the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:1-3). Jesus’ explanation is clear. The disability was there so that he might heal that individual. While on the one hand this was a specific instance, a general principle lies behind it. God allows some people and not others to be disabled in order to accomplish his purposes.<sup>11</sup>

**Myth:** *People with Disabilities Lack the Faith to Be Healed.* Some people believe that if a person has enough faith, he or she could be healed. This is not taught in the Bible, but is based on a misunderstanding of Matthew 17:20 and 1 Corinthians 13:2 which seem to indicate that nothing is impossible with enough faith. Instead, the Bible teaches that we must pray as those who submit their wills to God and if it is God’s will, he can heal a person’s disability. This happened during Jesus’ earthly ministry and on a few other occasions in the Old Testament and the early church. Most would agree it could happen today. But it has always been done for the glory of God, and often for the growth of the individual. Many people with disabilities have great faith and live victorious Christian lives. In fact, their faith may be stronger than able-bodied believers *because of their disability*.

### 3. People with Disabilities Allow Fellow Believers to Demonstrate God’s Love and Faithfulness.

Jesus prioritized spiritual needs but did not neglect physical and cognitive needs. This should be our role with persons with disabilities. In Acts 6:1-6 we read how deacons in the early church also served as role models for all believers in assisting others, especially widows. It is estimated that a widow was about 60 years old on average, and most likely had the common disabilities brought on by aging. With great confidence that God can use us, we should consider our mission and motives:

**A. Our Mission: How Can We Serve Persons with Disabilities?** We began this study by saying that God’s story in Scripture is about his mission on earth. Our mission, which must be consistent with his, should begin with evangelizing and discipling people with disabilities (Matt. 28:18-20). This two-stage process should always be our first priority. People with disabilities need to be in Jesus’ church learning and growing. Compassionate treatment and mercy ministry should be woven into the fabric of every thought and deed pertaining to disability, not treated as an additional component of disability ministry or, worse yet, pitted against evangelism and discipleship as it often is. Once we have prioritized spiritual matters, we must address what might prevent someone with a disability from participating in the Christian life and avoid several pitfalls.

- We must consider how to lead people with disabilities to Christ. We must not appear to place conditions on our love for them. This is easy to do. For example, we must not let unbelievers think we won’t trouble ourselves with them if they do not become a Christian. This is manipulation and it is wrong.
- We must help people with disabilities to grow spiritually in the best way possible. We must not cause those who claim to be Christians to think that unless they grow spiritually in conduct, we will treat them like children by punishing them or ignoring them.
- Finally, we must provide opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in all aspects of church life. They must be enabled to fully engage in worship and have an opportunity to exercise their spiritual gifts (1 Pet. 4:10). In short, we must see to it that every aspect of the local church experience is realized in their lives.

**B. Our Motives: Why Should We Serve People with Disabilities?** Believers should serve God out of both fear and love for him. There is no contradiction here. Motives are complex. It might help if we

understood some of the direct and indirect reasons God gives us for caring for persons with disabilities. Hopefully, we can then serve with purer motives. The following motive list is ranked from the weakest to the strongest.

- *Because We All May Be Disabled Some Day.* In Ecclesiastes 12:1-3, Solomon talks about the “difficult days” referring to end of life issues. Statistics remind us that at some point in our lives more than 70% of us will not be able to climb a flight of stairs. Most of us will become visually and hearing-impaired to the point where we may not be able to see or hear at all, or at least we’ll require glasses or hearing aids. These are *disabilities*.<sup>10</sup>
- *Because Our Eternal Rewards Will Be Based on Serving Selflessly.* In Luke 14:12-14, Jesus instructed a group of Pharisees and a dinner host about humility. “When you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:12-14). Here Jesus struck at the heart when he said, in essence, this is the best kind of service because people with disabilities were not expected to repay. God keeps a record of our good and bad deeds. Solomon summarized, “The end of the matter is this; fear God and keep his commandments for all must give an account of every deed” (Eccles. 12:13-14). The Bible calls believers to humble ourselves and serve God for heavenly rewards.
- *Because We Must Help the Weak.* The apostle Paul says our faith will work itself out in our love toward other people. “In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner [supporting Paul] you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:35). We come to understand the word “weak” as it is used in other contexts, for example, “And a great multitude was following him, because they were seeing the signs which he was performing on those who were sick” (John 6:2). But we must be cautious in defining what actually helps any individual.<sup>11</sup>
- *Because God Has Empowered Us to Love Well.* We thank God for whatever measure of healthy bodies and minds he has given us. Out of our thankfulness we consider how we might help people whose bodies and minds do not work well or work at all. The world of a person who has a disability is often physically difficult and emotionally painful. For those with mental disabilities the situation is sometimes even more difficult.
- *Because Believers with Disabilities are Part of the Body of Christ.* One of the most worthy reasons for serving people with disabilities is that it is the right thing to do. Whatever responsibilities and privileges fall to all believers in the body of Christ, they also are due to those with disabilities. We may even find that those with disabilities can do certain things better than more able-bodied and able-minded believers.
- *Because Believers with Disabilities Serve Uniquely.* Perhaps most importantly, people with disabilities can minister in incredible ways. In fact, they can minister as effectively, if not more so, than their sisters and brothers in Christ who do not have disabilities.<sup>12</sup> Their physical or mental disability, in God’s hands, becomes a ministry blessing. This brings new insight to Paul’s challenge that all believers in the body of Christ have gifts





the church needs (1 Pet. 4:10). He was not excluding people with disabilities. We are blessed to have them as part of our individual and collective Christian experience.

The Bible, by treating people with disabilities as part of the assembly in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament, shows us clearly that people with disabilities are just people who happen, by God's sovereign plan, to have disabilities. They are not another category of persons, but people with a wide range of unique abilities. If we desire to submit to biblical teaching, we will treat all individuals as one of us and give assistance where it is needed.

We would be remiss if we did not conclude by recapturing the spirit of the prophets who saw disability as ultimately glorifying God. Our greatest blessings in service will come through being a blessing to others with disabilities and being served by them. God's story began in a disability-free paradise with a tree. That is where it ends and reopens for a new and endless disability-free eternity. Jesus entered our sin-cursed world and brought healing through his death. No wonder John says in the final chapter of our Bibles, "And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. And there was no longer any curse" (Revelation 22:3). There will no longer be any disability.

Not every story finds a happy ending. But for those who love people with disabilities and those loved by them, the ending could hardly be better—perfect bodies, perfect minds, and perfect fellowship with God, whose story includes disability.

## Recommended for Further Study

- Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* By Saul M. Olyan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)
- Biblical Corpora: Representations of Disability in Hebrew Biblical Literature* By Rebecca Raphael (Edinburgh: T & T Clark International, 2008)
- This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* By Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, (Leiden: Brill, 2007)
- Forms of Deformity: A Motif-Index of Abnormalities and Disabilities of Human Form in Traditional Jewish Literature* By Lynn Holden (Edinburgh: T & T Clark International, 1991)
- The Blemished Body: Deformity and Disability in the Qumran Scrolls* By Johanna Dorman (Groningen: Rijksuniversiteit, 2007)
- Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story* By Jeremy Schipper (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2006).

### NOTES

1. Disability terms are low frequency and vary with the translation: Blind (KJV 82, ASV 79); Deaf (KJV 15, ASV 16); Dumb [= mute] (KJV 29, ASV 31); and lame (KJV 66, ASV 70).
2. This study follows the contours of the disability theme, and begs a more detailed study of Genesis-Revelation and the theme's development.
3. All Scripture quotations in this paper, unless noted otherwise, are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB)
4. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation.
5. It is significant that the Hebrew words used in this passage that translate "mute", "deaf", and "blind" are specially marked with a grammatical pattern indicating physical disabilities. C. L. Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995): 21.
6. Historical studies include Harry A. Hoffner, "The Disabled and Infirm in Hittite Society," *Eretz - Israel: Archaeological, Historical, and Geographical Studies* 27 (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2003).
7. Olyan, *Disability*, 62.
8. Interestingly, although the Bible lacks an equivalent term for our English "disability" it presents a perspective on disability that is consistent and pervasive. While it is true that the disabled were sometimes treated as ritually unclean (Lev. 21:18; 22:22), it seems clear enough that this had to do with the transmission of disease or the perception of unblemished perfection in didactic symbolic gestures. See Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*. These small and potentially confusing aspects of disability pale in significance and scope when compared to the Lord's heart for people with disabilities seen throughout Scriptures.
9. We must be cautious in using Isaiah's and other writers' language for sometimes he refers analogically to spiritual disabilities (spiritual blindness, etc.).



10. *The New International Reader's Version* has sensitively rendered the language of disability in this passage.
11. Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God* (New York: Dutton, 2008): 112
12. The 2000 U.S. Census found that 19.4 percent of the population is affected by physical or intellectual disability. For a challenge to rethink how we define, categorize, and view disability from a Christian perspective, see Deborah Creamer, *Disability in Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Academy, 2008).
13. Those who would lovingly help those with disabilities must consider how love is best applied. To love is not to develop a dependency, which robs an individual of dignity. See Glenn J. Schwartz, *When Charity Destroys Dignity: Overcoming Unhealthy Dependency in the Christian Movement* (Lancaster, Pa: World Mission Associates, 2007): xvii.
14. See, "Surprised by Disability: Why the Parts of the Body that Seem to be Weaker Are Indispensable," *Christianity Today* (October, 2008) [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/october/15.100.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/october/15.100.html).



**Dave Deuel, M.A., Ph.D.** (Cornell University and The University of Liverpool) is the Director of International Academic Studies for Joni and Friends as well as the Academic Director of The Master's Academy International, a consortium of ministry training schools worldwide. Dave served as Regional Director for Joni and Friends in the San Fernando Valley, CA and in board positions for The North Los Angeles Regional Center, All Children's Hospital (Los Angeles), Direct Link for the Disabled and a Governor's Advisory committee for Disability (Sacramento). He is Chairman for the Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern consultation of the Evangelical Theological Society. Dave focuses his ministry interests on assisting others in starting and developing ministries, primarily on the foreign field. He also ministers with and to persons with disabilities through Joni and Friends' Christian Institute on Disability.



# The Kingdom of God and Disability

## A Commentary on Luke 14:1-24

By Rev. Steve Bundy

People with disabilities are shown as central to the teaching on the kingdom of God in Luke 14:1-24. However, to understand Luke's message regarding those with disabilities, we must also recognize the eschatological or "future-oriented" nature of the broader section of Luke 13-14. One commentator notes:

In two sets of units in sequential parallelism (13:10-35; 14:1-35), Luke explores a series of reversals and paradoxical inversions associated with the manifestations of the kingdom of God, both in connection with its present manifestation and in connection with its manifestation at the time for the consummation of all God's purposes.<sup>1</sup>

For our study we will examine only Luke 14:1-24. Although we see the theme of "contrast and reversals" throughout the gospel of Luke, it is seen most clearly in chapters 13 and 14, where Christ challenges various religious and social practices of the day and begins to introduce the "now and to come" nature of the kingdom of God.

### Religion that Does Not Reflect the Kingdom—Luke 14:1-6

Christ was invited to eat on the Sabbath with a prominent Pharisee and other guests. Similar to what Luke recorded in chapter 13, Christ's teaching here takes place on the Sabbath in the midst of religious leaders, with a person with a disability as the focal point. The focus highlights both the here and now and an emphasis on the future: "The language for the meal, *θαγειν ἄρτον* [*thageiv arton*], 'to eat bread,' anticipates that of v. 15 (in connection with the kingdom of God): in Luke's literary handling, this Sabbath meal anticipates the eschatological banquet."<sup>2</sup>

This is the fourth time Luke records controversy over the Sabbath (Lk. 14:1). It is obvious that this is a major issue between Jesus and the religious leaders (see also Lk. 6:1-5; 6:11; 13:10-17). Three of the four occurrences involve a person with a disability.<sup>3</sup> A "prominent" host had invited Jesus—literally, one of the "ruling" (*ἀρχοντων των θαραισαιων/archoton ton tharisaon*), meaning he was possibly a member of the Sanhedrin. The significance is that: 1) those invited were likely of the upper class (Lk. 14: 7, 12), 2) those invited were other religious leaders, including "experts in the law" (Lk. 14:3), and 3) "he was being carefully watched" (Lk. 14:1).

From the context it appears that they were still gathering to eat when a man with dropsy appeared before them. The language is similar to that in Luke 13:11 which divides scholars on whether or not the man was an actual "plant" by the religious leaders. Given the context that "he was being carefully watched" (Lk. 14:1) and the apparent group of "experts," it is likely that the man was planted there so that Jesus could be caught in some trap of his own words or actions.

On a technical note, dropsy is an abnormal accumulation of fluid in the body that causes the body to swell. It can be quite painful, not to mention making it physically difficult to move around. It is not only serious in itself but is also a sign of illness affecting the kidneys, liver, blood, and/or heart. Rabbis of Jesus' day were of the opinion that a person so afflicted had committed a grievous sin (Nu. 5:11-27).<sup>4</sup>

The NIV translation renders verse 2 as “There in front of him was a man *suffering* from dropsy” (emphasis added). The Greek here is literally, “And behold, a man certain there was dropsical before him.” There is no use of the root word for suffering (πάσχω/pascho, used in many NT texts to communicate suffering; see Rom. 8:18). In other words, the NIV translators inserted the word “suffering” to best communicate what they believed was the meaning of the text.

It has been said that suffering is the common denominator among all humans. Everyone will suffer in some way. While some with a disability would not consider themselves “sufferers” any more than the rest of humankind, most, I have found, would reasonably argue that there is a very real suffering that does come with certain limitations and challenges resulting from (or associated with) their disability. This argument, of course, grows in strength as we consider the plight of the disabled in less developed countries. It is also important to note that suffering does not necessarily have the connotation of “victim.” We see from Romans 8:20 that creation itself longs for redemption. Notice it is also in the context of suffering that Paul wrote his letter to the Roman Christians (see verses 17-18). Due to the fall of man in Genesis, all creation—especially humankind—experiences suffering, whether disabled or not.

While Christ certainly came to relieve suffering (Lk. 4:18-19), he also indicated that the poor would always be among us (Mk. 14:7). In other words, not all healing means complete relief from suffering, for everyone that Jesus healed eventually died. I have concluded that there are four main categories of suffering that people experience at some point or another in their lifetime, disabled or not:

1. physical (including cognitive and mental suffering),
2. spiritual (a consequence of sin and separation from God),
3. emotional (circumstances of life such as heartbreak, divorce, loss of loved one, and other disappointments), and
4. social/cultural (including socio-religious, socio-economic, socio-political, discrimination, segregation, and the like).

It should be acknowledged, however, that in some cases the degree of suffering may differ for persons with and without disabilities. In many cultures, it is fair to say that some of those with disabilities have experienced deeper levels of suffering in all four categories than those without disabilities—and this experience is often lifelong, rather than a one-time “crisis” that has a beginning and ending point. Much of this suffering has to do with the culture and society in which they are born.

Jumping ahead in this chapter for a moment, we see that while Jesus did provide physical healing for this man (Lk. 14:4), he later exhorted the host of the meal to include in his life the “poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind” (Lk. 14:13). While not every person on this earth is physically healed—in fact, the majority are not—what Jesus provided here was a model that brought healing (relief) in all four categories of suffering, the context for this healing being spiritual and social relationships.

Think of what spiritual encouragement and support is found in a community of relationships connected to God; what emotional support is found when people around you can relate and “bear one another’s burdens” (1 Cor. 1:3-7); what a change for the good in culture and society takes place when we learn to accommodate and include “differences” that teach us about life; and what a difference shared resources can make for those whose physical or intellectual limitations prohibit them from making gains or having access to certain structures that they would otherwise not achieve or have access to! Christ was, in a very real sense, creating the model he would later call the church.<sup>5</sup>

As with the woman with a disability in Luke 13, Jesus took immediate notice of this man with a disability at the Sabbath meal. Knowing the hearts of those in this “hostile” gathering, Jesus asked the experts



in the law: “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?” (Lk. 14:3). There was a prevailing opinion among rabbis that healing of the sick or disabled was not allowed on the Sabbath unless there was a distinct probability that a person would otherwise die that day.<sup>6</sup> The question created a dilemma for the religious leaders; what they had intended to be used against Jesus had now been turned on and used against them. The text tells us they “remained silent” (v. 4). In his commentary on Luke, Alfred Plummer explains:

The dilemma, if they had planned one against Him, is now turned against themselves. These lawyers were bound to be able to answer such a question: and if rigorist Pharisees made no objection when consulted beforehand, they could not protest afterwards. They take refuge in silence; not in order to provoke Him to heal, but because they did not know what to say. They did not wish to say that healing on the Sabbath was allowable and they did not dare to say that it was not.<sup>7</sup>

In their silence Jesus healed. Taking the man, Jesus—as he often did—touched him during the healing process. After he was healed, Jesus dismissed the man from their presence, likely in order to remove him from the situation where those present had a dislike for Jesus and now for this man whose presence had brought about such embarrassment for them. Caught in their own trap, their concern for their own religious traditions outweighed their concern for the disabled.<sup>8</sup>

Sensing the tension, Jesus once again posed a question to expose the wickedness of their hearts: “If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?” This is a parallel to the context of Luke 13:15-16, with the exception that Jesus here did not call them hypocrites. This is not because they were any less hypocritical than those he addressed in chapter 13, but rather because those present had not yet spoken up against the healing—they were still stumped over not being able to answer the first question regarding the law. Now, once again, they “had nothing to say” (Lk. 14:6).

In the structure of this sentence Jesus placed the stress on “of which of *you*” (ΤΙΝΟΣ ὑμῶν/tinus humon), framing the question as a specific question posed to each one who was present. Jesus also used the word “immediately” to convey to them that just as they would not delay (another day) but would think nothing of it being the Sabbath to rescue their son or animal if it were in danger.

There do not appear to have been any restrictions on rescuing a person or animal on the Sabbath in Jewish Sabbath regulations. There were, however, restrictions among the Qumran people found in *The Damascus Document XIII*: “Let not a man help an animal to give birth on the Sabbath day and if she lets her young fall into a cistern or ditch, let him not lift it out on the Sabbath.” Jews in general, however, would not hesitate to rescue their family members or animals.<sup>9</sup> Once again, the religious leaders were “red-faced” over their self-centered lives of caring more for their own children and animals than the children of God. We also see that it is a person with a disability through whom the lesson comes—as will also be the case in the remainder of chapter 14, where Christ illustrated the nature of the kingdom of God in the consummation of the age.

## Blind Hosts and Dishonored Guests—Luke 14:7-11

In verses 7-11 Jesus noticed that the guests were jostling for the places of highest honor. The irony here cannot be overlooked. Jesus had just healed a man with a disability who had not been invited to the meal. Rather than celebrating with this man over this miraculous intervention, inviting him to the table and “hearing his story,” the guests were trying to gain recognition of their importance by means of claiming the best seats. Jesus had just “claimed” this man with a disability for the kingdom and they were busy claiming seats of recognition in their religious tradition.

Jesus told them a parable about places of honor at a wedding feast. Jesus likely chose this example because the places of honor at a wedding were more clearly delineated than they would be for a meal at the house of one of the Pharisees. In other words, even though it may not have been obvious that their intentions were to obtain the seats of honor, he used a clear example in order to reveal what was really happening. The point of “feast,” however, could also have been intended as a direct segue into the instruction about “whom to invite to a feast” that Jesus was about to give to the host. In the parable of the wedding feast it is the host who has the final say over who has the seats of honor. Do not overlook the parallel in this story with what we read in Luke 13 and are about to see in the rest of chapter 14. Who has the seats of honor in God’s economy, in God’s kingdom? The “Host” will decide.

Jesus stressed *humility* over pride and *promotion* over humiliation. Instead of having a self-righteous attitude that one deserves and should take a seat of honor, Jesus taught that humility recognizes honor is not determined by class, status, position, or wealth—rather, it is determined by God.

It would be a mistake to think this is a new teaching for the religious leaders. Jesus’ teaching here echoes Proverbs 25:6-7: “Do not give yourself airs in the presence of a king. Do not occupy the place reserved for important people. It is better to have someone say to you, ‘Come up here,’ than to be forced to a lower place in the presence of a prince.” The problem for this group was not a problem of knowledge, but of the heart. Though they knew well the teachings of Scripture, they were full of pride and self-arrogance. Jesus ended this parable with the words, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk. 14:11), much like the way he concluded his teaching in Luke 13:30, “Those who are last will be first and the first will be last.” In the minds of these spiritual leaders, the man with a disability was last and they were first. Jesus made clear this is not true with the kingdom of God.

As if it were not already explicit enough, Jesus now turned to the host in verses 12-14 and spoke directly to him.

## The Host—Luke 14:12-14

Here we see one of the most descriptive explanations of the nature of the kingdom in the Book of Luke. Similar to the pattern in chapter 13, Jesus moved from ministry to those with a disability (Lk. 14:1-6), to a lifestyle of humility and placing others first (Lk. 7-11), to a lifestyle of daily inclusion of those with a disability (including the Gentile, poor, outcast and outsider), and concluded with a future view of the kingdom.

Jesus gave this instruction to the host: “When you give a luncheon or dinner...” (v. 12). Similar to the personal application Jesus stressed in Luke 14:5 (“If one of you has a son...”), Jesus also made his “commission” to the host personal: “When *you* give a luncheon...” It is important to note that we find here the first of two “commissions” in which Jesus gave clear instruction on the inclusion of those with a disability into our personal lives and the life of the church. The first “commission” is to us individually. If our lives are to reflect the kingdom of God, then we should live like the King, a lifestyle inclusive of those with a disability. The second “commission” here is to the church, the representatives of his kingdom. This is found in Luke 14:15-24, which we will look at shortly.

Notice that Jesus used both “luncheon” (ἀριστον/ariston) and dinner (δειπνον/deipnon), which suggests that Jesus was not merely referring to one particular meal, but rather was communicating the notion of a comprehensiveness of meals to be encompassed by one’s hospitality. In other words, Jesus was not suggesting just a special occasional meal; rather, one’s normal lifestyle should be that of inclusion of those with disabilities, those “others” not normally invited to a meal in their culture—those outside their comfort zone of traditional association, those they considered “lowly” and would not find in the seat of “honor.”

More specifically, Jesus mentioned here the typical guest list of a Pharisee, including “friends, brothers, relatives and rich neighbors” (Lk. 14:12). He added that the motive of the heart is usually that of reciprocity, a desire to be repaid in some fashion or form. He then provided an alternative guest list for the host, one that comes from the “Host” of all banquets and has the places of honor already reserved:





“But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed” (Lk. 14:13). The contrast in lists was obvious to those present. The first list included those currently present at the meal; the second list represented the man with a disability who had been healed (and those with him) but who had not been invited.

This reversal and contrast is one that had been displayed in the life and teachings of Jesus. As Jesus walked the earth and ministered to the needy he “revealed the Father” (Jn. 1:18), showing us the character and nature of God. Here he taught that the nature of the kingdom, which reflects the King (the Host), is such that it has a place of honor for those who have been rejected, marginalized, and cast out of religious and social settings because of disability or status. This text sets an understanding of the nature of the kingdom that influences all that the church is and does. For if the kingdom is one in which people with a disability have a seat of honor, then the church would do well to understand the heart of the King and his love for the overlooked.

A lifestyle of inclusion of persons with disabilities will indeed return blessings, that is, blessings of the kingdom.<sup>10</sup> As Hendriksen comments, “What minister cannot bear testimony to the fact that some of the finest lessons he ever learned were given to him by the poor... the small, the sick, the handicapped, the dying?”<sup>11</sup>

Not only will there be an earthly blessing, but a heavenly one as well: “...you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Lk. 14:14). Once again the immediate context for discussion is earthly ministry (here and now) set in the broader context of eschatology (the yet to come).

## The Great Banquet—Not What They Expected—Luke 14:15-24

Once again we see the parallel of emphasis in chapters 13 and 14, with a focus on contrast and reversal:

By setting 14:15-24 (with its rounding up of totally unlikely guests for the banquet of the kingdom of God) in parallel with 13:22-30, Luke establishes a dialectic between human responsibility stressed here and the priority of God’s grace and initiative... The reversal here is of the expectation of those who experience the earthly ministry of Jesus and expect to be present at the banquet of the eschatological kingdom.<sup>12</sup>

As soon as Jesus brought up the resurrection of the righteous, someone at the table quickly jumped on the topic of the “feast in the kingdom of God” (Lk. 14:15). From the context and Jesus’ response it is clear that the tone of the one who spoke up was quite “pious.” Having just been rebuked by Jesus about not caring for the disabled and outcast and being told about places of honor in God’s kingdom being reserved for the poor, this guest tried to give a corrective reply regarding his (and the other guests’) position in the great banquet of the kingdom.

This only added fuel to Jesus’ fire. In a sense, he responded with, “You want to talk about the kingdom? Okay, let’s talk about the kingdom....” He then launched into a parable that is unmistakably a climactic point in the gospel of Luke. In chapters 13 and 14 Jesus had ministered to two persons with disabilities, had twice rebuked the religious leaders for their hypocrisy and their greater concern for their animals and own affairs than for the outcast children of God (all in his name), had foretold of Gentiles and outsiders becoming “insiders” in the kingdom of God and “insiders” becoming outsiders, and had specifically communicated that a lifestyle that reflects the kingdom was in fact a lifestyle of inclusion of those with disabilities. Jesus now threw the final punch: all he had been teaching up to this point was simply a reflection of the kingdom to come!

To those present, a discussion of the “feast in the kingdom of God” (Lk. 14) had a clear meaning. Jews viewed the Messianic kingdom of God in all its fullness as that of a great banquet, with lavish amounts of

food, drink, and fellowship, with God ultimately ruling all the earth, including Gentiles: “On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best meats and the finest wines.”<sup>13</sup>

The thing symbolized in this way is the full enjoyment of blessedness in the perfected kingdom of God. The lost are not only humbled so that they submit to the Lord, but they also take a part in the blessedness of his church and are abundantly satisfied with the good things of his house. Although the feast is on Earth, it is on an Earth that has been transformed into Heaven; for the party-wall between God and the world has fallen down; death is no more and all the tears are forever wiped away.<sup>14</sup>

To better understand the radical nature of what Jesus was saying to those present, it is necessary to reflect upon the common Jewish theology of the day relating to this 700-year-old conversation of “The Great Banquet” in Isaiah 25. Kenneth Bailey in his book *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* provides insight into the beliefs held.<sup>15</sup> When the Jews returned to Judea from the Babylonian exile, the language had changed from Hebrew to Aramaic.

About the time of Jesus, an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the Targum was used in the synagogues. Some of the translators of the Targum took great liberty in translating the texts. As a result, the Targum gives us insight into how people in the first century understood some of the biblical texts.

It is apparent that the translators of the Targum did not care for Isaiah’s all-inclusive vision of the great banquet: “Yahweh of hosts will make for all the peoples in this mountain a meal. And although they supposed it is an honor, it will be a shame for them and great plagues, plagues from which they will be unable to escape, plagues whereby they will come to their end.”<sup>16</sup>

Following in similar footsteps of the Targum translation, the Book of Enoch (2<sup>nd</sup> Century B.C.) speaks of a great banquet with the Messiah except that it affirms the presence of the Gentiles. “But the angel of death will be present to destroy those Gentiles. The banquet hall will run with their blood and believers will have to wade through it in order to reach the table!”<sup>17</sup>

The Qumran community (1<sup>st</sup> Century B.C.) was certain that no Gentiles would be present at the great banquet. Only pious Jews who obeyed the law would be there. What is also clear from this scroll is that no one with disabilities would be present. Listen to their Scroll of Messianic Rule as it relates to the disabled: “No one can attend the banquet who is smitten in his flesh, or paralyzed in his feet or hands or lame or blind or deaf or dumb or smitten in his flesh with a visible blemish.”<sup>18</sup>

By the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, Isaiah’s vision of the inclusive great banquet is completely obscured by certain prejudices against the Gentiles and the disabled.<sup>19</sup>

Turning to the self-righteous man, Jesus reiterated in parable form what he had already said about “seats of honor” and “guest lists” that had on them the names of the disabled and outcasts. He now indicated that this “feast of the kingdom” in which they had put such self-confidence would in fact be “filled” (Lk. 14:23) with those about whom he had just spoken. In the parable, “a certain man was preparing a great banquet” and had invited a large number of guests. In those days it was not uncommon to first invite and then send a reminder. The story does not indicate that any had declined at the first invitation, so they were expected to attend once the banquet was prepared. As the host eagerly waited for his guests to arrive and enjoy the well-prepared feast, his servant returned with the message—no one is coming—as if they were of one mind not to participate in this banquet. Luke makes it clear in verse 18, which can literally be translated as, “And began with one (consent) to excuse themselves all.” As Plummer comments, “There was no variation; it was like a prearranged conspiracy: they all pleaded that they were at present too much occupied to come. And there was not a single exception.”<sup>20</sup>

Notice that of all the excuses mentioned, not one was a legitimate excuse that would justify “disgracing” the host and his banquet. Buying a field, buying oxen, and getting married are all insufficient excuses for dishonoring the host. What a powerful analogy for those who will not partake of this great eschatological feast! It is as if something in their hearts led them to conspire together to hide behind excuses in order to avoid honoring the host.



As the host listened to the servant he became angry at the illegitimate excuses and ordered his servant to “go out quickly in the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame” (Lk. 14:21). A reiteration of the “guest list” mentioned in Luke 14:13, Jesus was now stressing once again that the kingdom belongs to such as these. That the servant had to go to the “streets and alleys” (v. 21) conveys the socioeconomic position of the poor and disabled. Similar to what we would experience in a downtown urban setting, a “street” was the broader, more traveled road where you would expect to find beggars who are poor and disabled; “alleys” were more hidden, off the path, and usually where the least of the least would be found. As Hendriksen explains, “the servant is now sent into that part of the city where the underprivileged people were living; the poor, crippled, blind and lame, the very people already mentioned in verse 13.”<sup>21</sup> Notice the segregation of the disabled from the mainstreamed—the servant had to go out past the neighborhoods, hotels, schools, and even the synagogues to find the disabled.

The master told the servant to “bring [them] in” (v. 21). Hendriksen goes on to comment:

This was probably necessary, not so much because, for example, the blind would not have been able to find the banquet hall unless they were taken by the hand and led, but rather because all of the groups here mentioned might well entertain serious doubts with respect to the question whether a sumptuous banquet *could really be for them*.<sup>22</sup>

A lifetime of neglect, abuse, and discrimination had driven the poor and disabled into the outcast places of the city. Why would anyone want to celebrate them? Jesus’ teaching and lifestyle redefined for the Jews of his day what the kingdom of God was all about.

James, the half-brother of Jesus, seemed to have “caught” what Jesus “taught” when he wrote:

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” have you not *discriminated* among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him? (Jas. 2:1-5, italics added)

In verse 23, the servant reported that all the master had requested had been done, but there was still room for more. The master then told the servant to go out again, but this time to the “roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full.” This host was gracious and wanted nothing he had prepared to go to waste—for he had plenty to lavish upon those who had been neglected by society. “Roads and country lanes” were locations outside the city. Now that those inside the city had been gathered, his servant was to go outside the city where the “untouchables” would be living in small shacks and dwellings, many segregated according to disability or disease. The servant was now to literally *compel* them to come in (v. 23). The language conveys a strong urging or compelling, something that was necessary for them. The host desired that his house be “full” of people who were poor, crippled, blind, and lame; he would not start the banquet until they had all been gathered and had a place at the table. Those who in the comfort of their lifestyle and self-confidence made excuses would in no way participate in the banquet. But for those with a disability and others marginalized in their society, the host made it clear: the kingdom was made up of “the least of these brothers of mine” (Mt. 25:40).

As he ended the parable in verse 24, it is clear from Luke’s writing that Jesus switched from a parable of a host to himself as host, speaking directly to those present: “I say to you (plural).” He now made it a personal address to those listening: you are the guests who made excuses; those who did *not* make excuses are the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame (v. 21).<sup>23</sup>

What Jesus makes clear in these verses is his heart for those with disabilities. There should be no doubt where Jesus stands in his love and compassion toward those affected by disability. Likewise, there should be no doubt among an unbelieving world where individual Christians and the church stand in our care and concern for those touched by disability. As Jesus taught in the account of the Good Samaritan, “Go and do likewise.”

## NOTES

1. John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35B (Dallas, TX: Word, 1993), p 721.
2. *Ibid.*, pp 745-746.
3. There are numerous other recordings of Jesus with the disabled in Luke and the other Gospels, but three specifically on the Sabbath in Luke.
4. William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), p 720.
5. Much of the thoughts here on suffering and the church comes from my personal experience working professionally with the physically and developmentally disabled—as a licensed minister, pastoring families affected by disability and as a staff member at Joni and Friends International Disability Center—but also and especially, from my experience as a father of a son with physical and developmental disabilities.
6. William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), p 720.
7. Alfred A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke* (Edinburgh, UK: Morrison and Gibb Limited, 1989), p. 355.
8. See also Luke 13:14, where the synagogue ruler rebuked the woman with a disability and those with her for coming for healing on the Sabbath.
9. William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), p 720.
10. For further study on the blessings of friendship with the disabled, refer to Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Jensen, *Barrier Free Friendships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1997).
11. William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), p 725.
12. John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35B (Dallas, TX: Word, 1993), pp 734, 736.
13. see also Isa. 25:6; see also Ps. 23:5; Mt. 8:11-12; 22:1ff.; 26:29; Mk. 14:25; Rev. 3:20; 19:9).
14. Carl F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Trans. J. Martin (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969), p. 439.
15. Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).
16. *Ibid.*, p. 310.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
19. I am grateful for the work of Dr. Kathy McReynolds in summarizing Kenneth Bailey's chapter on Isaiah 25.
20. Alfred A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke* (Edinburgh, UK: Morrison and Gibb Limited, 1989), p. 361.
21. William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), p 732.
22. *Ibid.*
23. J. M. Creed, *The Gospel According to St. Luke: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Indices*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1957), p 192.



**Steve Bundy** is the Vice President of Joni and Friends overseeing the Christian Institute on Disability and International Outreach. He was a contributing author to *Life in the Balance: Biblical Answers for the Issues of Our Day*, and co-executive producer with Joni Eareckson Tada of the Telly-Award winning television episodes, “Making Sense of Autism: Myths That Hide the Truth” and “Truth for the Church.” Steve has served as adjunct professor at Master’s College and has lectured on disability ministry at educational institutions and conferences around the world. He frequently appears on *Joni and Friends* television episodes, national radio and has written articles or been interviewed for *Christianity Today*, *Charisma Magazine*, *Focus on the Family* and others. Steve and his wife, Melissa, know firsthand the joys and challenges of parenting a child with special needs, as their own son, Caleb, was born with a chromosome deletion which resulted in global delay and a secondary diagnosis of autism. Steve holds a B.A. in Theology and Missions, a Certificate in Christian Apologetics and an M.A. in Organizational Leadership. He is a licensed minister and has served as a pastor and missionary.



# The Church and Disability Ministry

By Rev. James Rene

Get ready to roll up your sleeves.

We're going to cover the nuts and bolts of disability ministry in the church. How do you get your church leadership and church onboard? Where do you find volunteers and how do you recruit them? What are the important topics for training? What ministry models do you begin with?

God's intention is that we embrace our own suffering and those who are experiencing suffering. We'll study Paul's letters that admonish all believers to build one another up in love, sharing one another's burdens and joys through fellowship and genuine community. We're going to study what Scripture says about the mature church; how ministering to people with disabilities, the broken and suffering, is not a burden or an obligation, but a privilege and ministry to Christ himself.

People affected by disability are one of the world's largest unreached people groups in every culture of the world. Part of the strength of Joni and Friends over the years has been the formation of strategic partnerships with churches and ministries, as well as social and governmental organizations. Together, they have worked to meet needs and help empower people with disabilities.

Throughout this session you will be introduced to friends of Joni and Friends who have been transformed by God's amazing grace. God bless you as you seek to obey his wonderful mandate.







# The Church & *Disability Ministry*

*We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that  
this all-surpassing power is from God.*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:7

A church is comprised of ordinary people with extraordinary potential for both good and evil. Thus, a church must function as a living and moving *organism* with the ability to love, forgive, encourage and support. At the same time, a church is an *organization* in which divine work is accomplished. God calls leaders, pastors and teachers to service, which requires strategic planning and implementation. Leaders must also be faithful stewards of the finances and resources that the Lord has entrusted to them, which requires accountability.

Problems arise when a church is unbalanced in either function; i.e. *organism* or *organization*. If a church operates as an organism, with no structure or organization, it risks ministering without responsibility or direction, resulting in all sorts of spiritual abuse within the fellowship. On the other hand, if a church functions strictly as an organization, it can become insensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, relying solely on the wisdom of men. This can result in the church becoming an “institution” rather than a family with a heart for God and a hurting world. Disability ministry doesn’t fare very well with either scenario.

In these next sessions we’ll discuss biblical and contemporary models of the church’s role in reaching families affected by disability. We’ll examine the challenges that can prevent these families from joining the mainstream of church life. We’ll discover that when a church fails to welcome the disability community there’s a high price to pay—Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me” (Matt. 25:45).

## SESSION **Two**



### OBJECTIVES

Studying this session  
will help you:

- ✓ Explain from Scripture a brief overview of ecclesiology and the importance of its theological framework.
- ✓ Explain the main images the Bible uses to define the nature and function of the church.
- ✓ Describe the church as the broken body, suffering body and mature body of Christ.
- ✓ Understand the seven movements of disability ministry.
- ✓ Explain how a “mature church” understands God’s plan for disabilities and responds.



The phrase “United we stand—Divided we fall” is attributed to Aesop’s fables, but it originated in the heart of God. He created all people, with and without disabilities, to live in unity with him and in fellowship with one another. The counter image of this would be to divide and rule, which causes chaos in our lives, as well as in our churches. Unity—“one body called to peace” (Col. 3:15)—transforms our brokenness and builds mature faith communities.

## I. Identifying the Church’s Theological Framework

People describe the church in many different ways depending on their personal experiences. The church is complex, because it’s made up of people, who themselves are complex. Therefore, we must first define the church from a biblical point of view, rather than a sociological standpoint. In Millard Erickson’s book, *Christian Theology*, he describes a modern, societal shift to a more secular train of thought regarding the church, as well as how people view God. For thousands of years it was believed that God related to the world solely through the supernatural institution of the church. However, Erickson observes that the church is no longer seen as God’s special agent which solely embodies his divine presence. He sees the results of this shift as worrisome. Erickson writes:

There is a widespread conception that God dynamically relates to the world through many avenues or institutions. The emphasis is upon what God is doing, not upon what he is like... As a result of this change in orientation, the church is now studied through disciplines and methodologies other than dogmatic or systematic theology . . . The new emphasis applying non-theological disciplines and methodologies to study of the church poses a danger as the church struggles to understand itself theologically. The major problem with attempting to define the church in terms of its dynamic activity is that such a definition avoids making any kind of statement regarding the nature of the church.<sup>1</sup>

With the foregoing in mind, the rest of this session is devoted to the task of developing an explicitly *biblical* view of the church as it relates to people with disability.

### A. Ecclesiology: The Doctrine of the Church

The church is a “chosen people.” The term “ecclesiology” comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*—*ek*, which means “out of,” and *kaleo* means “to call.” Thus, the church is “a called out group.” In the Old Testament the term is used in Deuteronomy 9:10 as “the day of the assembly.” *Ekklesia* appears 114 times in the New Testament, and the phrase “called out people belonging to the Lord” was a familiar term for New Testament writers, especially Paul who used the term 111 times.<sup>2</sup> Even the origins of the English word for church can be traced back to the Greek word *kuriakon*, which means “belonging to the Lord.”

Chuck Colson, Founder of Prison Fellowship and The Chuck Colson Center for Christian Worldview, spent years observing the church and powerfully challenged the worldviews of today’s Christians. Speaking during the 2009 Joni and Friends President’s Retreat, Mr. Colson said this about the church:

The single greatest need of the Christian church is to understand that Christianity is not just a relationship with Jesus. But it’s a way of seeing all reality... I am convinced

that the biggest single weakness of the church is that we have a reductionist view of Christianity—it's just me and Jesus. We think we're in good shape. Jesus is taking care of me, and I've got a great relationship with Jesus. That's an abomination!

## **B. The Biblical Nature of the Church**

We must recognize that historically the church has not always reflected its true nature. As saints or “holy ones” we are called to reveal God’s character by our love for others.<sup>3</sup> Our nature—infused by the power of the Holy Spirit—should reflect the images, figures, functions, and purposes of God in the world. The Bible uses three primary images to describe the church.

- 1. The People of God**—We belong to God and he belongs to us. When God commands us in Exodus 20:7 to not take his name in vain, he’s asking us not to claim his name and then live contrary to his character. In Matthew 5, he calls Christians the “salt of the earth” and a “city on a hill” which means we are to display his words and works through our lives and testimonies. When nonbelievers look at the church, they should say, “These are a people who belong to a holy God.”
- 2. The Body of Christ**—This image means that the church is the focus of Christ’s activity on earth. The church is his body; though made up of many parts, it forms one union: “*Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it*” (1 Cor. 12:27). A body cannot reject a part of itself and still function as a complete body. Christ is the Head of the church since God has placed all things under his feet and has appointed him over everything concerning the church.<sup>4</sup>
- 3. Temple of the Holy Spirit**—The Spirit gave birth to the church at Pentecost (1 Cor. 12:13), and the Spirit continues to give life to churches today. The Spirit is not a “tool” that God uses simply to “repair” his people—rather, the Holy Spirit of God relates to our spirits and it is by him that we call God our “Abba” Father (Rom. 8:15). We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit both individually (1 Cor. 3:16-17, 6:19) and collectively (Eph. 2:21-22). In him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

## **C. The Biblical Functions of the Church**

Any effective organization has a set of well-defined statements of its purpose and goals; if it has no purpose, it will have no direction. Many people have different opinions regarding what the church is called to be and do in the world. But the Bible specifically identifies the following functions of the church in its call to minister to the Lord, to one another, and to the world.

- 1. Worship**—individual attitude of the heart (Matt. 5:23-24; Rom. 12:1-2; 1 Tim. 2:10, 5:4) and corporate (1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16)
- 2. Instruction**—early church model (Acts 2:42, 5:28, 18:11) and correct doctrines (1 Tim. 1:3; Acts 5:28)
- 3. Edification** through ministry and fellowship—breaking bread together (Acts 2:42), prayer (Acts 4:24-31), ministry inside the church (Rom. 12:3-8), and supporting the ministry (Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 9:13)

4. **Evangelism**—ministry outside the church (Acts 8:4, 11:19-20)
5. **Organization**—appointing leaders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5)
6. **Ordinances**—baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Acts 2:41; 1 Cor. 11:23-24)

#### **D. Koinonia—The Ingredient for Community Life**

*Koinonia* is a New Testament Greek word which means “communion” or “fellowship” among Christian believers. Paul’s letters to the churches admonished them to build one another up and commune with one another and with God. Church was never meant to be a “place” people simply visit for worship, but rather a shared community where friends knew one another’s joys and burdens. Throughout the New Testament, *koinonia* is used to communicate:

1. Unity and bond between believers—Acts 2:42; Philem. 1:6; 2 Cor. 8:4
2. Unity with Christ—1 Cor. 1:9, 10:16; Phil. 3:10
3. Unity between the Trinity and the church—2 Cor. 13:14; 1 John. 1:3-7; Phil. 2:1
4. Partnership in the gospel—Gal. 2:9; 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 1:3-5

## **II. Where Is the Church Today?**

### **A. Why Are Many Churches Missing the Mark?**

According to Erik Carter in his book *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities*, “Numerous faith groups have acknowledged their failure to respond to people with disabilities in ways that reflect their calling to be caring, loving, and responsive communities.”<sup>6</sup> Although it is difficult to quantify the precise degree of involvement of people with disabilities in churches, various statistics reveal a need for churches to become more active in ministering to families affected by disability. Below are some U.S. statistics:<sup>7</sup>

1. According to one study which queried parents of children and youth with disabilities, fewer than one-half of children and youth with autism, deaf-blindness, intellectual disabilities, or multiple disabilities had participated in religious activities at any point during the previous year.
2. When 200 parents of adolescents and young adults with autism were asked about their child’s attendance at religious services, less than one-third reported their child attended on a weekly basis; only 11% attended religious social activities.
3. One-third of children and adults with intellectual disabilities who live in foster care or small group homes rarely attended religious services; only one-fourth “sometimes” attended religious services.
4. In a survey of 91 Christian, Jewish and Muslim congregations, 71% said they had a general awareness of the barriers to inclusion for the disability community; 69% said they *had not yet started* or were just beginning to transform their church family into a place of



inclusion; 53% said they were in the process and only 28% had explored partnerships with community agencies or organizations serving the disabled.

Even with the abundance of biblical teaching on the image and function of the church, we still fall into the trap of wanting our churches to appear “successful” and “to have it all together.” We prefer members who wear the right clothes, drive the right cars, and know the right vernacular. But this is an illusion and a misunderstanding of what God truly desires—*our brokenness*.

Bible teacher Dr. Michael Beates says, “For us to understand the power of God working through His people, we must understand two things: first, brokenness forces us to see God as the ultimate and only reliable source of power; secondly, God, through His Holy Spirit, brings about brokenness in the people He intends to use for His glory.” In the following paper, Dr. Beates discusses the church as a broken body, a suffering body and finally, by God’s grace, a maturing body.



**READ:** “Major Challenges of the Church on the Path to Maturity” by Dr. Michael S. Beates (See page 48)

What are the sources of brokenness according to Dr. Beates? (Ps. 119:67; 1 Cor. 1:27-31; 2 Cor. 12:7-10)

## **B. The Church as a Broken and Suffering Body**

Identification is one of the most powerful tools God uses in the lives of believers to bring about brokenness. Through relational ministry to and with broken people (disabled, poor, marginalized) God breaks, blesses and gives away a transformed and selfless life. Christ is the ultimate example of identification.

- John 1:14—The Incarnation—“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...”
- Hebrews 2:17—“Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every way...”
- Matthew 25:40—“When you’ve done it to one of the least of these my brothers, you’ve done it unto me...”

Throughout world history Christian believers have suffered for various reasons, but with a single purpose—brokenness! And the early church was no exception. It grew and expanded as a result of suffering. God allowed suffering to enter the life of the church just as he allows it to enter the lives of individual believers. God’s intention for his church is that we embrace our own suffering, and embrace those who suffer. To the degree that we exclude them from our faith community, we exclude ourselves from the depth of God’s grace.

**1. Jesus, the Suffering Servant**—In Isaiah 54 Jesus was described as a *Man of Sorrows* who was acquainted with grief and who carried our sorrows. He felt abandoned by God (Matt. 27:46). In Revelation 5:9-12 Jesus was “*the Lamb that was slain*” who became a curse for us (Gal. 3:13).

**2. Paul’s Call to Suffering**—“*I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’s sake...*” (Acts 9:15-16). He also suffered for the gospel (Col. 1:24).

- 3. The Church's Call to Suffering**—We are to “*share in Christ's suffering...*” and to be used by God to spread the gospel (1 Pet. 4:12-13; Acts 8:1-4). Suffering and brokenness produce character (Rom. 5:3-6), maturity (Jas. 1:2-4), faith (1 Pet. 1:6-7) and trust (2 Cor. 1:8-11).

### C. The Church as the Mature Body

*Being a Christian is more than just an instantaneous conversion—  
it is a daily process whereby you grow to be more and more like Christ.*

DR. BILLY GRAHAM

The path to Christian maturity is a slippery slope; one that should not be traveled alone. For this reason, every church has its “saints” who model faith in the midst of weakness. We are privileged to watch these saints and grow from their example.

The mature church understands the role of brokenness and suffering in the lives of believers and responds in positive ways. It recognizes that God is at work and counts ministry to the broken, disabled and suffering not as an obligation, but as a privilege—as if ministering to Christ himself.

- 1. The privilege of ministry to the broken**—Many cultures stress the importance of being *independent*, that is, not needing anyone to help or assist one on one's journey. Being “self-made,” in this view, is a sign of competence and strength. Being *dependent* on anyone or anything is a sign of weakness. In reality, this is an illusion—we all need each other, and we all need God. No one “makes it” alone. We are, in fact, *interdependent* upon God and one another. Disability helps us see that we are all broken and all part of the same body, needing to give and receive from one another. This in turn keeps each member of the body *accountable* to Christ and one another. People with disabilities have much to contribute to the body of Christ—and when they are not present, the body is incomplete.

God's intention for the church, his body, is that it would “*grow up in all things...*” (Eph. 4:15). Part of growing up is having a proper understanding of serving and accountability to others. Disability is one way God shows his church how to become his *complete* body.

- 2. The privilege of joining in the priesthood**—In 1 Peter 2:5,9 we are reminded that through Christ we are now a holy priesthood. The “priesthood of believers” means that we as believers have direct access to God, where once only a qualified minority (i.e., a priest, under Old Testament law) represented God to the people and the people to God. As a priesthood, we also are now ministers to one another through natural, spiritual, and “calling” gifts (Rom. 12:1-8; 1 Cor. 12:1-11; Eph. 4:7-16). As Peter went on to emphasize in 1 Peter 4:10, “Each one should use whatever gifts he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.”

- 3. Understanding our calling to serve**—In light of these privileges, should the church then function as an organism or an organization? Both are essential to a mature church. The New Testament church is a practical model in both Luke and Acts. Paul's letters also emphasize the “one another” aspect of the Christian lifestyle. He uses active verbs such as accept one another, love one another, build one another up and bear one another's burdens (Rom. 14:19, 15:7; Eph. 4:2; Gal. 6:2). Just as the early church struggled to live out this kind of unity, especially in accepting Gentiles, today's congregations must

stretch to extend their love to all people. God's love is transformational. It moves us to action, as the early church lived out in Acts 2.

**READ:** Acts 2:42-47



**VIEW:** Joni at Foundations (available at [www.gaa.joniandfriends.org](http://www.gaa.joniandfriends.org))

In Joni Eareckson Tada's message to a disability ministry class, Joni discussed Colossians 2:19 and pictured Christ as the head of the church. She stressed that "each member" of his body has a gift that should be used to serve one another and honor the Lord.<sup>8</sup> Joni says, "If the lines of communication between the head and the rest of a physical body are disrupted, then certain parts of that body will be ignored or neglected. This can also be true of the church."

Discuss the four key words Joni uses to help Christians better understand their calling to serve.

### III. Practical Applications for the Church

The success of a church's ministry is not necessarily defined by the size of the congregation. It's the church that prayerfully seeks God for a sensitive heart toward those who are in need that finds opportunities for the richest ministry. For ministry to take place among those affected by disability, the church and individual believers alike must intentionally move toward seven specific areas of ministry," says Rev. Bundy.

#### A. Seven Movements of Ministry to Persons with Disability

1. **Ministry of Fellowship**—Movement from Program to Presence
2. **Ministry of the Word**—Movement from Quantitative Ministry to Qualitative Ministry
3. **Ministry of Obedience**—Movement from Ministry of Convenience to Ministry of Conviction
4. **Ministry of Identification**—Movement from Being Understood to Understanding
5. **Ministry of Prayer**—Movement from Being Important to Being Available
6. **Ministry of the Spirit**—Movement from Being Heard to Listening Intently
7. **Ministry of Reciprocity**—Movement from Teaching to Being Taught



**From:** "Modeling Early Church Ministry Movements" by Steve Bundy (See page 60)

#### B. The Tale of Two Families

Church growth specialists tell us that we have seven minutes to make a positive first impression when a family visits our church for the first time. Churches that understand this concept have

elaborate plans such as parking lot attendants, door greeters, welcome centers manned with smiling helpers, coffee bars, class escorts, clear directional signs, well-trained ushers, pre-service videos or music, and exit greeters at the end of the service. In other churches, visitors can park, enter, worship and leave without a smile or handshake from a single person.

For families affected by disability, going to church can be one of the best or one of the worst experiences of their whole week. Unfortunately, many families are turned off by their first visit to a church. But, occasionally, they're pleasantly surprised by the warmth and welcome they receive.

**Family A**—When Thom and Blanca Siebels' third child, James, was diagnosed with autism they found it increasingly more difficult to maintain *normal* family life. James' condition sometimes required 2-3 therapy sessions per day in their home and going out to dinner after church on Sunday was nearly impossible due to James' behavior problems. Church friends had always been an important part of their lives so they determined to take turns volunteering in James' class... until one day when the teachers failed to show up and the Siebels were left alone to teach 21 third-graders. Unfortunately, James bit a classmate that day before his busy parents could stop him. A church leader called the Siebels a week later asking them to stop bringing James to class because 10 families had vowed to stop coming if James was there. Thom and Blanca were devastated.

**Family B**—Dan and Marisol Jaramillo and their daughter, Meghan, were accustomed to being stared at and feeling alone in public, where no one identified with a 17-year-old wheelchair user. Meghan's birth defect, Arthrogryposis Multiplex Congenita, caused reduced mobility in many of her joints. But everything changed for them when they found a church with a support group for parents with special needs children and a welcoming youth group for Meghan. Dan and Marisol knew they needed to be closer to God, so when they began meeting with other couples who prayed about the same fears and concerns they had for their child, it was obvious they'd found the right church for their family. Another confirmation came when a group of girls invited Meghan to a sleepover. Her father couldn't believe it! "They knew what it took to take care of Meghan's needs, and they wanted her anyway... just as she was!" said Mr. Jaramillo. "Outside of church it's a cruel world out there, but in the church we've found comfort, love and hope for the future."



**VIEW:** Siebels Family/Jaramillo Family (available at [www.gaa.joniandfriends.org](http://www.gaa.joniandfriends.org))

### ACTIVITY CHALLENGE

Search for a church in your community that has a support group for couples and/or families affected by disabilities. Ask permission to visit the group or to talk to some of the couples who attend. Remember to respect their need for privacy, but share with them that you're taking a course to better understand disability ministry. After your visit, compare the biblical framework of the church with the experiences of these families.

## Reflections on Session 2

The Church & Disability Ministry

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1. Discuss the growing shift in how our modern society thinks about the church.
  2. How does Chuck Colson's description of a "reductionist view of Christianity" conflict with the biblical nature of the church?
  3. Identify the biblical function of the church.
  4. What are some true signs of "koinonia" in a local church?
  5. According to Dr. Michael S. Beates, what are the major challenges of the church on the path to maturity?
  6. Reflecting on the privileges of striving to be a part of a mature body of Christ, how are you being stretched in your faith?
  7. Discuss the importance of the seven movements of ministry described in Rev. Bundy's paper as they relate to persons with disability.
  8. Write a prayer using Acts 2:42-47 as a model for your church's disability ministry.
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# Major Challenges of the Church on the Path to Maturity

By Dr. Michael S. Beates

The church. Mention the word and a vast array of ideas and images enter people's minds. Some may conjure images of quaint, classical buildings with steeples that house local congregations where they grew up. Others may think of a grand and profound movement of God across the centuries and around the world. Our ecumenical creeds remind us that the church is "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." Further, accepted teachings remind us that the church is "visible and invisible," "militant and triumphant," and that it is "local and universal." There are many good studies which unpack these important ways to understand the church.

The Bible offers multiple images of the church. The church is called the bride of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit and the branches connected to the life-giving vine of Christ. But perhaps the most provocative and instructive biblical image for our purposes is the church as "the body of Christ." The Scriptures are rich in describing the church in this manner. But to our surprise, the one we most often find is not the one that first comes to mind, especially in the West. Over the last couple of centuries, God's people have fallen prey to cultural forces which portray the church as being full of successful, well-dressed people whose lives are well-ordered and influential in the affairs of the world.

What the Scriptures show us, however, is the church as a broken body, a suffering body, and finally by God's grace, a maturing body. In this paper, we will explore these three depictions in more detail.

## The Church as a *Broken* Body

God never does things the way we would expect. In fact, throughout history, God takes the conventional wisdom and practices of the world and turns it on its head. The whole nature of the redemptive work of God is "upside down." Instead of using people of power and integrity, or beauty and influence, God uses unknown people such as Ruth, cowardly people such as Gideon and deeply sinful people such as David. The twelve disciples were culturally insignificant but God used them to achieve his purposes. Why? So that he alone will receive the glory and the credit for what happens when he works through such surprising vessels. And of course, the Lord Jesus came as a vulnerable baby, born in questionable circumstances and raised in a backwater town like Nazareth.

For us to understand the power of God working through his people, we must understand two things: first, brokenness forces us to see God as the ultimate and only reliable source of power; second, God, through his Holy Spirit, brings about brokenness in the people he intends to use for his glory.

## God as the Source of Power in Brokenness

When we consider the church as a Body of broken people, we must remember that in as much as our culture exalts strength and self-sufficiency, God uses "broken" people. And in doing so, he becomes the source of power. Our culture is focused on outward appearance, external beauty, physical and social power,



self-sufficiency, and self-achievement. Yet at the end of the day, we must admit that these cultural pursuits are idolatry. We make little gods of ourselves. Further, we assure ourselves that we control our circumstances. Convinced of this, when life “spins out of control,” we often need therapy to help us cope.

This has never been the way God works with his people. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 1:27-31 that God chose what is... foolish... weak... low... despised... things that are not—so no human may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus. In his second letter to this same church, Paul declared outright that his ministry was not from his own strength, but from God’s. In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, God says to Paul, “...my power is made perfect in weakness.” For Paul to boast in weakness seems absolutely insane to our modern sensibilities. To admit weakness means defeat in our world. But in God’s world, to admit weakness and defeat is necessary to accepting him as the source of real power and purpose. A maturing church must embrace this truth.

## The Holy Spirit Brings Brokenness

Not only is God the source of all power, the Scriptures show that the Holy Spirit brings about brokenness. The Spirit does this in three ways. First, through the faithful study and preaching of God’s Word, the Holy Spirit applies the truth of Scripture to bring conviction that our pride and arrogance are a source of weakness, not power. Jeremiah 9:23-24 says we should not boast in riches, strength, or wisdom (the three most vital human “powers”); rather, if we boast, we should boast in the LORD. And Psalm 51:17 tells us that “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit... broken heart...”

The Holy Spirit also uses life circumstances to convince us of our weakness and brokenness. God often uses tragedy, crisis, death and disability to bring about brokenness. Paul affirmed this in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 saying, he was given a thorn in his flesh. Though Paul sought relief, and though God sometimes brings physical relief through healing, God was pleased to work through Paul’s affliction. The psalmist concurred when he said, “Before I was afflicted, I went astray...” (Ps. 119:67). Affliction can heal us of the disease of depending on ourselves and drive us to depend upon the only truly reliable source of power: the Lord God.

Finally, the Holy Spirit uses “identification” as a tool to show us our brokenness. As we identify with Christ and with his people, we recognize that God breaks, blesses, and gives away a transformed and selfless life to those who are his. Christ is the ultimate example of identification. Through relational ministry to and with broken people (disabled, poor, marginalized, etc.), Jesus identified with weakness and brokenness. His incarnation, seen in John 1:14 (“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...”), brought him to identify with our humanness. And this allowed him to identify with us through his earthly experience, understanding our temptations and our weaknesses.<sup>1</sup> So likewise, he calls on us to identify with those more outwardly broken and weak in order to understand our real state. The Lord Jesus said, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it unto me...” (Matt. 25:40). As we identify with the weak and marginalized, we not only gain a better understanding of ourselves, but we identify with Christ as well.

It is humbling to admit we do not measure up, that we are not sufficient, that we are broken people. But the body of Christ must grasp this counterintuitive truth in order to find and dwell in God’s power. We must have the courage to look at each other on Sunday—well-dressed, well-spoken, appearing to have it all together—and say, “We know better. We are broken people, desperately needing the power of God to come in our weakness.”

## The Church as a *Suffering* Body

Throughout Christian history wherever in the world the church holds forth the light of the gospel of Christ, believers in Christ have suffered. The early church began this pattern. In Act 8:1, after the death of Stephen, a great persecution broke out, and the church grew and expanded as a result of the ensuing

suffering. God allowed this suffering to come into the corporate life of the church then, just as he allows it in the lives of individual believers still today. God's intention for his church is that we identify with and embrace those who suffer and not exclude them from the community of believers. Suffering as the body of Christ follows the Savior's call to suffer, as well as the Apostles' call and example of suffering.

## The Savior's Call to Suffering

In His life, Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy of the Suffering Servant. He was indeed a "Man of Sorrows... acquainted with grief... who carried our sorrows..." (Isa. 53:3-4, *NKJV*). Though he is eternally the Son, and the second part of the Trinity, enjoying eternal bliss and fellowship with the Father and the Holy Spirit, yet, he humbled himself. In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul reminds us that Jesus "made Himself nothing"<sup>2</sup> and humbled Himself in a progressively downward manner. First he became a human being, flesh and blood. For the eternal God, this alone was an act of infinite self-humiliation. But he went beyond this, taking on the nature of a servant, living as a simple Galilean. Further, he willingly died, another infinite and mysterious act of suffering and humility. But finally, he not only died, but died in an act of profound humiliation: as a criminal on a cross, bearing on his body the sins of the lost. In this act, he experienced abandonment by God the Father (Matt. 27:46) and became "the Lamb that was slain" (Rev. 5:9-12, *NASB*). Jesus literally became a curse for us (Gal. 3:13), taking on our sin so that we might be clothed with his righteousness. Paul reminds us that "For our sake he made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21, *ESV*).

John Calvin said the Christian piety of self-denial is "the beginning, middle, and end of Christian living." In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."<sup>3</sup> Jesus calls his followers to a life of self-denial, suffering, and even, in God's providence at times, death, for his sake and for the sake of his people.

## The Apostles' Call to Suffering

While the Savior's call to suffering is clear, the apostles also issued an unvarnished call to suffering. The Lord foretold this to the disciples in Damascus saying he would show Paul how much he would suffer for the sake of his name.<sup>4</sup> And indeed, Paul's testimony included a long list of sufferings for the sake of Christ.<sup>5</sup> Paul came to the place where he said, "I rejoice in my sufferings... filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions ..." (Colossians 1:24, *ESV*). Further, Paul declared that his goal in life was to know Christ, the power of his resurrection, to share in his suffering, becoming like him in his death.<sup>6</sup>

The apostle Peter also spoke numerous times of this divine calling for God's people. He explained that suffering is an integral part of the normal Christian experience when he said, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet. 4:12-13, *ESV*). Peter affirmed that God not only calls us to suffer, but assures us of God's plan when he said, "And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you" (1 Pet. 5:10, *ESV*).

And of course, remember that James opened his letter to the churches saying, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4, *ESV*). Suffering, Jesus and the Apostles tell us, is the path to maturity. The world tells us to seek pleasure, comfort, and security. But the most enduring lessons and the deepest maturity come through the crucible of suffering.



## The Church as a *Mature* Body

Perhaps the most provocative metaphor the Scriptures employ for the church is “the body.” Just as our natural body grows, so the church grows. Maturity requires struggle, hardship, pain, and even brokenness to become, in God’s way and in God’s time, “strong.” The mature church must understand the role of brokenness and suffering in the lives of believers and the church must learn to respond to suffering and brokenness in a manner that gives God the glory. Maturity recognizes that God is at work through weakness and therefore counts ministry to the broken, disabled, and suffering not as an obligation, but as a privilege—as if ministering to Christ himself.

### The Role of Suffering and Brokenness in the Church

Repeatedly, the New Testament affirms that suffering and brokenness is the path to deeper maturity. We learn that suffering produces character (Rom. 5:3-6); it produces maturity (James 1:2-4); and it produces faith (1 Pet. 1:6-7) and deeper trust in Christ (2 Cor. 1:8-11). Not only is this stated propositionally as true, it is displayed in the lives of the people of God throughout redemptive history. Joseph came through much suffering to a place where he confessed that even those actions people meant for evil in his life, God meant for good and for the saving of many lives.<sup>7</sup>

Though David was called to a position of power and authority, it was brokenness and affliction that brought him to deeper maturity. The Psalms are replete with references to his pain, abandonment, loneliness and brokenness. Through these many difficulties, God sanctified and molded David into the person he needed to be.

As we noted earlier, Jesus in a mysterious way, though God in the flesh, was brought to a deeper maturity through suffering. From the writer of Hebrews, we learn that Jesus was “made perfect” through suffering and as such is able to help us in our weakness (Heb. 2:10).

Finally, again, Paul unfolds this for us most clearly in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. There he says that the body has some members that are weaker and less presentable. But in God’s providence, just as in our physical body, so in the body of Christ, these members are called “indispensable.” What the world would label as liabilities—those whose lives display weakness, brokenness, ugliness, and neediness—God calls absolutely necessary for the mature body of Christ. This is a crucial lesson the church must grasp. While we naturally avoid and even reject those who are different from us in their weakness, God says to embrace and bring close.

### The Privilege of Ministry to the Broken

Many cultures stress the importance of being *independent*. We grow up, especially in the West, learning to depend on ourselves, not to admit needing anyone to help or assist us on our journey. Being “self-made” in this view is a sign of competence and strength. Being *dependent* on anyone or anything is a sign of weakness. In reality, this is an illusion—because we all need each other, and even more we all need God. No one “makes it” alone. We are in fact *inter-dependent* upon God and one another. Disability helps us see that we are all broken and all part of the same body, needing to give and receive from one another. This in turn keeps each member of the body *accountable* to Christ and one another. People with disabilities have much to contribute to the body of Christ—and when they are not present, from Paul’s metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12, the body is incomplete, lacking essential elements.

God’s intention for the church, his body, is that we would “grow up in all things . . .” (Eph. 4:15, *NKJV*). Part of growing up is having a proper understanding of serving and accountability to others. Disability is one way God shows his church how to become his *complete* body. Bearing one another’s burdens is actually



a *privilege*, a way of assisting in the development of Christ's likeness in our personal lives and in the corporate life of the church. Paul says that if one member suffers, then all suffer (1 Cor. 12:26). As we identify with those who suffer, as we embrace the metaphor of an inter-dependent body, we begin to see how we can "bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:2, *NKJV*). As we suffer and receive comfort from God and His people, we are also able to "comfort one another" with the same comfort we have received (2 Cor. 1:3-7). The Holy Spirit brings forth the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22-23) in those who are disabled and non-disabled alike. The attributes of patience, longsuffering, self-control, joy, etc. are cultivated and displayed as the maturing body of Christ embraces those who suffer, those who live with disability, weakness, and brokenness.

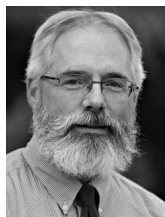
## Final Thoughts

The way people react to suffering and brokenness reveals their assumptions about the nature of the world. Many people assume the world is the way it should be and that suffering is an anomaly to be avoided at all cost. But the mature church says with conviction that the world is not as it should be. In fact, all creation has suffered the effects of sin and the Fall. All creation groans and longs for redemption and renewal. Because we admit that the world is broken, we believe there will be a re-making, a redress of injustice and brokenness. Brokenness creates a longing in God's children for all the brokenness and weakness to be changed and made right. And in this "making right" God will receive glory and worship.

The mature body of Christ says, "For from him and through him and to him are all things"—even suffering and brokenness—and "To him be the glory forever!"<sup>8</sup>

### NOTES

1. Hebrews 2:17; 4:14-15
2. Philippians 2:7
3. Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23
4. Acts 9:15-16
5. 2 Corinthians 4:7-12; 11:23-29
6. Philippians 3:10
7. Genesis 41:51-52; 50:20
8. Romans 11:36



**Dr. Michael S. Beates** is the father of seven children, the eldest born with profound disabilities. He earned M. Div. and S.T.M. degrees from Biblical Seminary in Pennsylvania and the Doctor of Ministry from Reformed Theological Seminary Orlando. Mike teaches Bible and History at The Geneva School in Winter Park, Florida. Since 2000, Mike has served on the International Board of Directors at Joni and Friends and, since 2008, on the Board of Reference for the Christian Institute on Disability. He has written magazine articles, editorial columns and contributed chapters to several books, including "God's Sovereignty and Genetic Anomalies" in *Genetic Ethics: Do the Ends Justify the Genes?*



# How to Start a *Disability Ministry* in the Church

We often hear the questions, “Can one person really make a difference? And if so, where does one begin?” You may be surprised to learn that one person with a disability has often been God’s change agent in a church. The first step is simply showing up with a desire to belong. That’s how it happened on Joni Eareckson Tada’s first Sunday back to her church after a lengthy recovery from a tragic diving accident. Joni recalls that day:

There I was, out of the rehab center only a few weeks, sitting upright and awkward in my bulky wheelchair and wondering what to do about Sunday morning. I knew my church had been praying for me since my diving accident two years earlier in 1967, but facing people terrified me. Would they stare? Would I know what to say? Would I have to sit next to my family in the pew, half blocking the middle aisle? And what if I had to wheel into the restroom—would I fit?

What I discovered that Sunday morning, after my family lifted me out of the car and into my wheelchair, changed my entire outlook on church. Someone had hammered together a few pieces of plywood to make a ramp. People smiled and asked me how I was doing at college. Old friends asked me to sit with them and held my Bible and hymnal. The feeling was warm and friendly. I felt welcome. I belonged.<sup>1</sup>

What happened in Joni’s church can happen in any congregation, but it doesn’t happen overnight. Even the most mature church can be immobilized by fear when it comes to adding a disability ministry on the shoulders of over-extended pastors and volunteers. However, when the church sign out front reads, “The Friendliest Church in Town,”

## SESSION Three



### OBJECTIVES

Studying this session  
will help you:

- ✓ Detect the myths about disability ministry.
- ✓ Enlist pastors and leaders in disability ministry.
- ✓ Explain the steps to becoming a disability-friendly church.
- ✓ Communicate the vision to the congregation and community.

and a wheelchair ramp or large-print Bible is nowhere to be found, we must admit that our words don't match our actions. No church wants to turn individuals and families with special needs away, but it happens far too often.

In Session One we examined the clear directive of the Luke 14 Mandate to bring in the "poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind." And in the book of James we read that faith without works is no faith at all.<sup>2</sup> So in this session we will roll up our sleeves and delve into some practical strategies that can open church doors to welcome those with disabilities. Successful ministries begin with a clear mission statement, so here are some examples of disability ministry goals.

## The Goals of Disability Ministry

- A disability ministry and outreach opens the door to share the gospel with people with disabilities and introduces them to a personal relationship with God.
- A disability ministry and outreach integrates people with disabilities into the life of the church and gives them the opportunity to have active roles in serving God.
- A disability ministry and outreach enables the church to serve as a witness or model to the community for meeting the spiritual, physical, and social needs of people with disabilities.

### Inclusion

If you have ever been picked last for the ball team or missed out on an invitation to a party, you know the pain of rejection. Maybe you once visited an unfamiliar church and felt alone, until someone struck up a conversation or invited you to lunch or a special event. That new friend flipped a PA switch announcing, "You belong here!" and that made all the difference. Full inclusion in the family of God should always be an open invitation!

### I. Addressing Concerns about Disability Ministry

Before we can build awareness for a disability ministry, we must shine some light on several misconceptions church members may have due to a lack of education. These common misunderstandings can keep churches from acting on their biblical values and convictions. Perhaps people in your own church have expressed concerns or fears about ministering to people with disabilities. Here are some typical ones:

*Our church doesn't have the resources or volunteers for a disability ministry.*

*Is disability ministry part of our church's vision or core values?*

*Volunteers need disability experience or a background in Special Education.*

*We don't have people with disabilities in our church.*

*People with disabilities will be a burden and can't contribute to our church.*

The truth is that congregations are filled with people whose gifts and talents are divinely designed to meet every need within the church family. Jesus showed us by example that all people should be treated equally. He spent time "hanging out" with people from all walks of life, doing simple activities

and getting to know them. God's love and mercy qualify Christians to reach into their communities where an estimated 20 percent of their neighborhoods are affected in some way by disability.<sup>3</sup> We naturally fear the unknown, yet all types of ministry are a risk to some degree. If we don't take the risk, we don't love people.

The Father's House video on the enclosed DVD discusses seven misunderstandings people have about disability ministry in the church. As you watch, make a list of the positive aspects that result from starting such a ministry.



**VIEW:** Watch Section 1 of The Father's House: Welcoming and Including People and Families Affected by Disability. Pause at 17:15, after "The Blessings." (available at [www.gaa.joniandfriends.org](http://www.gaa.joniandfriends.org))

### A. Moving from Conviction to Action

In Matthew 17:20 Jesus said, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move." Starting a new disability ministry can seem like a steep, upward climb. Before you begin, seek the Lord's direction through prayer and Bible reading. Ask God for the right timing and focus for this ministry. Enlist the support of the church's prayer teams and develop prayer guides to encourage others to pray for the needs of individuals and families affected by disabilities. Begin praying about how to inspire your church leaders and congregation to understand that people with disabilities belong in God's family and to take new steps of faith to begin a disability ministry.

Use the following Action Assessment Chart to consider your congregation's stage of commitment.

## Action Assessment Chart<sup>4</sup>

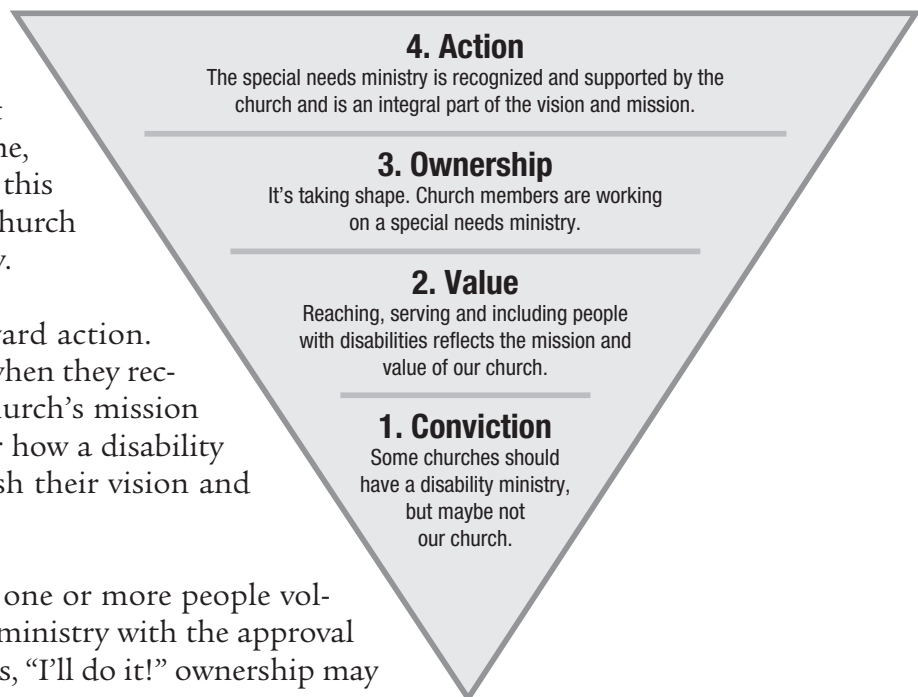
### Action Assessment Stages

**Stage 1**—Conviction is a belief that something should be done by someone, but not necessarily by your church. At this stage, churches are content to let the church across town offer a disability ministry.

**Stage 2**—Value is the next step toward action. Churches begin to value a ministry when they recognize that it is in line with their church's mission statement. Leaders begin to consider how a disability ministry could help them accomplish their vision and reach their community.

**Stage 3**—Ownership happens when one or more people volunteer to take responsibility for the ministry with the approval of church leaders. Until someone says, "I'll do it!" ownership may only be a mirage.

**Stage 4**—Action occurs when church leaders give their blessing to a plan and the plan is implemented. Goals are set and reported on. Families affected by disability feel welcome and included at church.



## B. Barriers to Participation

While some fears about disability ministry are unrealistic, there are legitimate barriers that can keep people with disabilities from full participation in the church, such as:

1. **Architectural Barriers**—These include issues of accessibility for the physically disabled: sanctuary, classrooms, fellowship hall, etc.
2. **Attitudinal Barriers**—Even greater than the architectural challenges are the challenges of attitude. Many people, even Christians, are prejudiced or biased against people with disabilities, particularly with respect to their ability to learn. This is especially true when an individual has intellectual and developmental disabilities.
3. **Theological Barriers**—Many church members may not see the necessity for a disability ministry. In their eyes individuals with disabilities need to be “delivered” or “healed.” Handicaps are simply not part of the “real” body of Christ.
4. **Communication Barriers**—It can be challenging to talk with people whose communication style is different due to deafness, blindness or other intellectual and sensory disorders.
5. **Pragmatic Barriers**—Enabling individuals with disabilities and/or their families to connect to the church may require practical assistance, such as adapted educational materials, special equipment or changes in meeting locations.
6. **Liturgical Barriers**—Some sacramental practices and rituals (such as communion or baptism) may exclude people with developmental disabilities. Some pastors or leaders may be unwilling to adapt or alter long-held practices.

Church pastors and leaders who understand Christ’s biblical mandate to include families affected by disabilities must educate their congregations to address and overcome these barriers.

## II. Everything Rises and Falls on Leadership

When starting a new ministry, it is critical to share your vision with your pastoral team and ask for their support and blessing. This is not a time to guess about financial resources for the ministry. Disability ministry is often seen as costly with little return; this is simply not the case. When you reach one person with a special need, you reach a whole family, as well as their friends and neighbors. Using Scriptures and testimonies from this curriculum will help leaders articulate the benefit of ministering to those with disabilities.

The disability director has an important role in ensuring that good policies, procedures and practices are established and followed. He or she acts as a bridge or liaison with groups inside and outside of the church such as community homes and organizations. Confidentiality is also crucial in leadership and ministry to people with disabilities. Individuals, parents and caregivers may provide the director with sensitive personal and medical information that is private and must be carefully protected. Ministry leaders that use this information for volunteer training should only share the necessary information in the strictest of confidences.

### A. No “Lone Rangers” in Ministry

Disability ministry is not a solo act. God places within the body of Christ all of the gifts and skills needed to minister to one another. Recruit a team of leaders which includes people with

and without disabilities. Share your vision with the team and lead them in developing a mission statement. Allow your team time to pray and own the ministry.

## **B. You Need Not Look Far to Find People with Disabilities**

- 1. Start with the need.** Who are those with disabilities in your community that are attending church or want to come? Start small and build from there. Trying to reach every age level and type of disability all at once can strain your team and cause burnout before you really get started.
- 2. Choose a model.** Decide what kind of disability ministry model works best in your church. Although full inclusion is usually recommended, there may be instances where a special classroom or separate meeting time is appropriate.
- 3. Decide what program(s) you might start with first.** If children with disabilities attend your church, you may begin ministering to those families by adapting teaching materials and starting a support group for parents. If you have adults with developmental disabilities, you may begin with Bible study groups and social events.

## **C. What Will Disability Ministry Cost?**

There may be some costs involved in making needed adaptations to your church facilities or programs. These must be considered and appropriately presented to the church leaders.

## **D. Many Are Called But Few Are Chosen**

As you recruit volunteers, put the call out for anyone who has a heart for ministry. Most people do not feel qualified to minister to people with special needs. Encourage church members to spend some time with you and others to simply observe and see how they might fit in. Once they get past the fear factor, they will likely enjoy the ministry.

*At first I thought we didn't have the resources to reach out in an intentional way to people and families affected by disability. Now I can't imagine having a church without ministry to them. Our church has significantly grown in Christ-likeness and in numbers as a direct result of disability ministry.*

Pastor Steve Pope

## **III. Ten Practical Tips for Becoming a Disability-Friendly Church**

Many churches already have an ideal character and environment for reaching out to individuals and families with special needs. There is a strong spirit of unity and fellowship, as well as a desire to share God's love through acts of service and mercy. There is a heart of expectancy among church leaders even when they're not sure of the direction God is leading. Then one person with a vision for the disability community has courage to speak up, and a new ministry is born. As you watch the second half of The Father's House, check these tips to assess the readiness of your church for a disability ministry.



**VIEW:** Watch Section 2 of The Father's House. Begin at 17:15, "10 Practical Tips for Becoming a Disability Friendly Church." (available at [www.gaa.joniandfriends.org](http://www.gaa.joniandfriends.org))



1. **Provide a warm, friendly, welcoming environment.** Greet people with disabilities as you would anybody else. Communicate that people affected by disability are loved, belong, and are included in your church.
2. **Provide basic disability awareness training for your church staff and volunteers.** Review basic disability etiquette. Invite a Joni and Friends representative or disability expert to your church. Obtain disability ministry resources from Joni and Friends.
3. **Improve accessibility. Make modifications where necessary.** Imagine yourself in a wheelchair or having difficulty with mobility and make necessary changes. If necessary, modify access to the main entrance, the sanctuary, restrooms and classrooms.
4. **Provide serving opportunities for people with disabilities.** Utilize people with disabilities to serve as ushers and greeters. Ask people with disabilities to help serve communion. Call upon people with disabilities to read Scripture. Include people with disabilities on the worship and prayer teams, or ask them to share their testimony.
5. **Provide disability-friendly materials.** Have large print or Braille Bibles available. Print song sheets for those who are visually impaired. Consider providing assistive listening devices for the hearing impaired.
6. **Provide space for wheelchair users throughout the sanctuary.** Shorten a few pews or take some chairs away from rows so wheelchair users can sit with their families and friends.
7. **Provide a sign interpreter for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.** Place a sign interpreter in a well-lit area that can be seen throughout the entire sanctuary.
8. **General communication and interaction tips.** Treat people with disabilities as you would anyone else. Speak directly with the person with the disability, not through their parents or caregivers. Be relaxed around people with disabilities, not awkward. Don't get caught up with fancy euphemisms, such as "physically challenged" or "differently able." Put the person first, not their disability.
9. **Provide assistance in the handicap parking area.** Have an attendant available to help people with disabilities from their vans. Offer to push their wheelchair if needed. Have a wheelchair available to assist those with difficulty in mobility.
10. **Provide a "buddy" or mentor for those who might need assistance.** Utilize assistants to help people with disabilities participate in worship service. Have a buddy system for children with disabilities in Sunday school classrooms.

#### IV. Intentional Inclusion

Generally, people with disabilities wish to participate in the same activities in the same way as any other member of the community. Most of them want to be members of a welcoming church family. Therefore, church leaders and members must work hard to make their churches fully-inclusive of all people, whatever their disability, in all aspects of church life, including worship services, social events, classes, and small groups.

## One Pastor's Story

The Living Springs Community Church in Glenwood, IL, launched their Friendship Ministry for people with disabilities shortly after moving into their new church, which was designed with disabilities in mind. When the church scheduled a Disability Awareness Sunday, the planning committee asked Pastor Chris Spoor to preach from a wheelchair and he readily agreed. In an interview with Pat Verbal for the book, *Special Needs Special Ministry*, Pastor Spoor shared that the experience went beyond his expectations.

I got into a wheelchair as soon as I arrived at the church that day. During the first service, I pushed myself onto the platform. But in the second service, a member of our Friendship Ministry team pushed the chair for me. I found that a little more difficult to accept. To be passively dependent on someone else was a very humbling experience. We don't have a special needs ministry to grow numbers. We do it because it's the biblical mandate of the church of Jesus Christ. One of our core values is 'intentional inclusion' in every area. Some people think that just refers to race, but it also means abilities...

Now, I tell other pastors how important it is to make up your mind to start a disability ministry and do it!<sup>5</sup>

Disability ministry may have some challenges and barriers, but as we have seen, they can be overcome. As we seek to obey Scripture to include people with disabilities in the life of the church, the Lord will guide us in creating a vibrant ministry with God-honoring, growing relationships.

For more information on starting a disability ministry contact one of the Joni and Friends Area Ministries across the U.S. through the church relations page on the Joni and Friends web site.  
<http://www.joniandfriends.org/church-relations/>

## Reflections on Session 3

### How to Start a Disability Ministry in the Church

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1. What is your church currently doing to serve the disability community? If your answer is "very little," why do you think more is not being done?
2. What do you see as the biggest barrier to starting or improving a disability ministry?
3. Have you heard church members express any of the attitudes discussed in The Father's House video? If so, how have these attitudes been successfully addressed?
4. Where would your church fall on the Action Assessment Chart and why?
5. List four practical tips from this session for becoming a disability-friendly church.



# Modeling Early Church Ministry Movements

By Rev. Steve Bundy

Michael was a factory worker who had many dreams and desires for his life. He was engaged to be married in six months and was already making plans for a future family. Michael wanted a large family with many children. All that changed one morning when he showed up for work unaware that the machine he was about to work on had a crack in its frame. Michael started the machine and began to put a piece of metal into it, just as he had for the past five years. He heard a loud noise and looked up to see the machine falling on him. Michael sustained serious injuries, including a fracture to his upper neck which left him a quadriplegic, unable to move his hands or legs, and only limited use of his arms.

Six months later, Michael is supposed to be celebrating his wedding day, but instead he's lying on his back, staring at the ceiling and dwelling on his fiancée's words: "I just can't live that kind of a life . . . I am so sorry that I cannot marry you."

Michael is depressed and lonely. His parents do not know how to help him. They, too, feel angry and cheated that such a tragedy happened to their only son. They feel as if there's no one to turn to, no one who understands what they are all going through. Finally, out of desperation, Michael's father picks up the phone and calls you for help. What do you do?

## Looking at the Early Church

The Bible tells us to be ready to "weep with those who weep."<sup>1</sup> It also provides clear examples of how believers should minister to one another and share each other's burdens. Luke emphasizes the nature of the early church as one in which believers cared for one another.<sup>2</sup> Consistent with Luke's theology—that Christ's ministry was one of reversals and contrasts of the kingdom—in the church, those who would seem to be on the "outside" are in fact the very ones we are to welcome, embrace and include. As the early church struggled to find its identity and especially in its struggle to include the Gentiles, it continually experienced a transformation of head and heart. This transformation intimately connected believers into a community of brothers- and sisters-in-Christ who understood that an individual's spiritual and physical needs were, in fact, everyone's spiritual and physical needs. This sort of transformation is one that says, "I will not turn you away because of your disability... for you and I are of the same family."

This is in line with Luke's theology of the needy, the outcast and the disabled—and eventually the Gentile, who will be included in the kingdom of God and the church of Jesus Christ. Robert W. Walls brings this out in his commentary on Acts by pointing out that the *koinonia* experienced by the early church was a transformation brought about by the Holy Spirit, a transformation "that has brought about a fellowship among believers that shares more than common beliefs and core values; they display a profound regard for one another's spiritual and physical well being as a community of friends."<sup>3</sup> Walls points out the prophetic typology of Jubilee (Lev. 25:10) and favorable year of the Lord (Isa. 61:2) that was fulfilled in Christ (Luke 4:18-21).

The new community of believers that would follow the risen Lord and Savior would indeed be a people who exemplify the life and ministry of Jesus among all people including the poor, the blind and the lame:

"All who believed were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:44, *NRSV*). At the beginning of his gospel, Luke uses the Isaianic prophecy about "the favorable year of the Lord" to introduce the principal themes of Jesus' anointed ministry (Luke 4:16-18). In particular, Jesus' actions among the poor and powerless in identifying with their marginal status within Israel and announcing their



deliverance are taken as the fulfillment of this prophecy of the Lord's Jubilee (Luke 4:21). Jesus' teaching about sharing possessions envisages the social character of God's kingdom where the conditions of the least, lame, lost and last are transformed. God's grace does not privilege the rich and famous; God's liberating love extends to everyone who calls on the name of the Lord for salvation. However, this Jubilee is possible only because of the empty tomb and only after Pentecost... God's kingdom reflects solidarity and mutuality rather than a class system; therefore, believers live together and have "all things in common..."<sup>4</sup>

There are six summary statements in Acts that respectively conclude six panels or blocks of material.<sup>5</sup> In the first panel, there are three summary-like paragraphs, each one giving us a glimpse into the very first days of the early church.<sup>6</sup> The birth and life of the early church came as a result of (1) the outpouring of the Holy Spirit; (2) growth in numbers of those who believed; and (3) persecution. We know from the three summary paragraphs that several characteristics of believers in the early church stand out. They devoted themselves to: (1) the Apostles' teaching; (2) fellowship; (3) breaking of bread; (4) prayer; and (5) performing miracles. Yet in all three summaries special attention is given to the *koinonia* that was held among the believers. There was no physical or spiritual need among them because "they had all things in common" (Acts 2:44). In commenting on this verse, Richard Longenecker refers to it as Luke's "thesis statement regarding the way the believer practiced communal living." Longenecker continues:

Luke is, then, 1) emphasizing that both continuous and extraordinary acts of Christian social concern were occurring in the early church and 2) tying these acts into the apostolic proclamation of the Resurrection... Experientially, the spiritual oneness the believers found to be a living reality through their common allegiance to Jesus must, they realized, be expressed in caring for the physical needs of their Christian brothers and sisters. Indeed, their integrity as a community of faith depended on their doing this.<sup>7</sup>

Many scholars feel that the early Christians viewed themselves as the righteous remnant within Israel and therefore had clearly in their minds the words of Deuteronomy 15:4, "There should be no poor among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you." Simon Kistemaker draws this parallel as well, connecting the acts of the early church back to Christ's message in the Gospels: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20; Matthew 5:3; and the rich young ruler, Matthew 19:21). Kistemaker comments, "The aim of the early Christians was to abolish poverty so that needy persons, as a class of people, were no longer among them (Acts 4:34a)."<sup>8</sup>

## Seven "Movements" of Ministry to Persons with Disability

Our ministry experiences shape our understanding of what ministry should look like. We often think of effective ministry as that which "captures" the greatest number of people or makes the most use of the church's resources. We need to reach as many people as possible and be good stewards of what God has given us. It is important, however, that our definition of successful ministry not be modeled on what the world defines as success ("bigger, better, faster!"), but rather on what God calls success.

We must take a personal inventory, look at our hearts and determine our true motivation. This calls for a time of slowing down, prayerfully seeking God through his Word and cultivating a sensitive heart toward those who hurt. For ministry to take place among those affected by disability, *the church and individual believers alike* must intentionally move toward seven specific areas of ministry.

1. **Movement from Programs to Presence** (*Ministry of Fellowship*). When ministering to those affected by disability, there is no substitute for time. "Programs" should not lead the way—rather,



presence of time, attention and sharing in the journey of the one affected by disability should take priority. In Acts 2:44 Luke calls this *koinonia*, that is, having all things in common... sharing the journey together.

2. **Movement from Quantitative Ministry to Qualitative Ministry** (*Ministry of the Word*). There are no substitutes for, or alternative sources of hope comparable with the inspired Word of God. In its truths we find the source of all hope in our affliction, discouragement and despair. Time is required in order to effectively minister God's Word to someone affected by disability. The minister's eye cannot be on *quantity* of ministry (numbers); rather, it should be on *quality* of ministry (accurately dividing the Word of Truth). Like a skilled surgeon applying the scalpel to a needed area for surgery, we minister by skillfully applying the Word of God to one who has encountered a life-altering disability.
3. **Movement from a Ministry of Convenience to a Ministry of Conviction** (*Ministry of Obedience*). Ministry to those affected by disability is not a ministry the church chooses because it is the *easiest* ministry; rather, the church engages in such ministry because it is the right ministry. This is an act of obedience to the Word of God and to our Savior, Jesus Christ. In Matthew 25:40 Jesus told us that ministry to people in despair, "*the least of these brothers of mine*," is indeed ministry to Jesus himself. Many churches today choose the ministry of convenience—ministry to those who fill the pews with the right style of clothing, perfume, hairstyle and bank accounts. By contrast, a ministry of conviction includes those affected by disability regardless of what they may give in return.
4. **Movement from Being Understood to Understanding** (*Ministry of Identification*). Every believer has a place in the body of Christ. Paul told us in 1 Corinthians 12:18-22 that God has arranged each member of his body "*just as he wanted them to be...*" and that those members who seem like weaker, useless members are "*on the contrary... indispensable*." The church, desiring to embrace and include those affected by disability, must move from conforming members into the likeness of the church to transforming them into the likeness of Christ. This process involves moving to a place of understanding each member's role within the church, especially those with disabilities. This also includes gaining an understanding of each individual's unique journey, struggles, gifts, talents and contributions to the body of Christ. It is in essence the ministry of identification with those with whom Christ has already identified.
5. **Movement from Being Important to Being Available** (*Ministry of Prayer*). Ministry to people with disabilities is often a behind-the-scenes ministry. It is not "in-the-spotlight" ministry that uplifts one's ego and highlights one's gifts, but rather a ministry of "downward mobility," to borrow Henri Nouwen's terminology.<sup>9</sup> It is a ministry of humility and of prayer. It is ministry that sets our own agenda aside to earnestly seek, through prayer and abiding, to minister to those with disabilities. This ministry involves interceding, by petition and thanksgiving, on behalf of others. It might entail inconveniences to one's time, resources and energy, such as trips to the grocery store, rides to church, invitations to celebrate Christmas together, home repairs and mowed lawns. This is ministry that many would call "unimportant," but is applauded by God as being available to Jesus himself.
6. **Movement from Being Heard to Intently Listening** (*Ministry of the Spirit*). In our fast-paced culture of immediate gratification, ministry to people, especially to those affected by disability, must be led by the Holy Spirit. We are so programmed to give "answers" that we rarely wait for the words of the Holy Spirit to inspire and lead us. We need his wisdom to know the right Scripture to quote, the right prayer to pray, the right relationships to establish and the right time to help. We need to listen intently to the Holy Spirit. But we also need to hear the one we are serving. Where





are they in their faith development? What are the real struggles they face in relationships, jobs and daily activities? Do they feel like they fit in at church? Allow them to reflect on how the Holy Spirit has been speaking to them. What are they receiving from the Scriptures? As we minister to those struggling with disabilities, we must restrain our desire to be heard and take time to discover their hearts.

- 7. Movement from Teaching to Being Taught** (*Ministry of Reciprocity*). Those with disabilities have much to teach the body of Christ about brokenness and forgiveness. Ministry to these friends is too often seen as a one-way street, as charity or a handout. However, when those with disabilities find themselves in Christ, they can become mighty ministers and witnesses to the Savior's grace, love and mercy. As God uses their physical or mental brokenness for his glory, they teach us how God uses spiritual brokenness to reveal himself through the church to the world. As Paul stated in 2 Corinthians 1:5, "*For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.*" The church must not miss this great opportunity to minister to those affected by disability and to receive rich ministry from them.

## Rejoicing in Life-Changing Ministry

Michael's reaction of despair and hopelessness is not uncommon after a life-altering accident. Joni Eareckson Tada has documented her own struggles with depression and has reached into the pit to help draw others out. God used Joni as a lifeline for Ron Huckabee after the former pastor had seemingly given up.<sup>10</sup> Out of desperation, Ron's wife, Bev, sent Joni an email explaining that her husband's paralysis, battle with cancer and constant infections had left him feeling hopeless. Joni reached out for Ron, reminding him of the truths clouded by the fog of depression and helped him see that God could still use him. Ron went from a depressed, bedridden quadriplegic, refusing to talk to anyone, to serving as the National Prayer Coordinator for Marketplace Ministries in Dallas, Texas. What changed him? Hope and a fellow believer willing to come alongside him and help carry his burden.

### NOTES

1. Romans 12:15, NKJV
2. Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16
3. Walls, R. W., (2002), *The New Interpreter's Bible, The Acts of the Apostles* (pp. 71-73). Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31
6. Longenecker, R.N., (1984), "Acts," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9 (p. 288). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Kistemaker, S. J., (1990), "Acts," in *New Testament Commentary* (p. 112). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
9. Nouwen, H., (1992), *In the Name of Jesus*. New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Co.
10. Ron Huckabee shares his story in the *Joni and Friends* TV episode "Get Busy Living," <http://www.joniandfriends.org/television>



**Steve Bundy** is the Vice President of Joni and Friends overseeing the Christian Institute on Disability and International Outreach. He was a contributing author to *Life in the Balance: Biblical Answers for the Issues of Our Day*, and co-executive producer with Joni Eareckson Tada of the Telly-Award winning television episodes, "Making Sense of Autism: Myths That Hide the Truth" and "Truth for the Church." Steve has served as adjunct professor at Master's College and has lectured on disability ministry at educational institutions and conferences around the world. He frequently appears on *Joni and Friends* television episodes, national radio and has written articles or been interviewed for *Christianity Today*, *Charisma Magazine*, *Focus on the Family* and others. Steve and his wife, Melissa, know firsthand the joys and challenges of parenting a child with special needs, as their own son, Caleb, was born with a chromosome deletion which resulted in global delay and a secondary diagnosis of autism. Steve holds a B.A. in Theology and Missions, a Certificate in Christian Apologetics and an M.A. in Organizational Leadership. He is a licensed minister and has served as a pastor and missionary.



# Outreach and Evangelism to *Families* Affected by *Disability*

People with disabilities are one of the largest unreached people groups in the world. Unfortunately, disability ministry can be seen as simply a care giving service, yet it must include a firm commitment to go where children and adults with disabilities are and declare the gospel to them. If your church is missing the joy of including these precious families in your outreach, this session will provide a variety of evangelism models.

Joni Eareckson Tada is the first to admit that she has never heard of one certain style of sharing the gospel with others. In fact, it may surprise you to know that it is Joni's wheelchair that initiates many of her opportunities. "People don't expect me to be happy in this wheelchair. Saying 'I have a reason for living' in response to their remarks about my singing or my smile, always evokes a curious look," says Joni. "That's when I add, 'Jesus has blessed me! By the way, what's your reason for living?' Sure it catches people off guard, sometimes delighting them, sometimes making them curious, and sometimes sending them running for the nearest exit. But one thing's for certain... it got them thinking."

Joni has learned to trust the Holy Spirit's work in people's hearts. She encourages us to prayerfully watch for opportunities to cultivate relationships and to rely on God to change people's lives.<sup>1</sup>

## SESSION **Four**



### OBJECTIVES

Studying this session will help you:

- ✓ Explain the scriptural emphasis on evangelism.
- ✓ Explain basic doctrines regarding God, Jesus and salvation.
- ✓ Understand a person's need for redemption and why people with disabilities may reject the gospel.
- ✓ Present the plan of salvation to individuals with various kinds of disabilities.
- ✓ Assist a new Christian with disabilities in their walk with Christ.
- ✓ Describe some practical outreach models to the disability community.



Friends with disability remind us of God's grace. Without Christ, we were once disabled spiritually, unable to move into his kingdom, blind to his purposes and deaf to his voice. By his grace we are made whole, and it is often the disabilities in others which serve as God's physical, audiovisual aid of how he's working spiritually in the lives of us all

## I. God, Open Our Eyes to People without Christ

Someone once suggested that all lack of evangelism was a lack of love on our part as Christians. Do you believe that is true? Why or why not?

When Samantha met Robert, she instantly felt compassion for him. His contorted body, blank stare and lip-drool made her want to back away from his wheelchair. Surely, Robert couldn't understand the message that he had come to church to hear. Samantha couldn't help thinking that his parents might have saved him an uncomfortable van ride and mercifully left him at home. However, being a well-trained church greeter, she touched Robert's shoulder and warmly welcomed him and his parents into the sanctuary.

During the service, Samantha prayed for God to strengthen Robert's parents. She asked that if they were not believers, God would help them receive the good news. She glanced at Robert several times during worship as his head dropped further down his chest and his father gently wiped his mouth with a handkerchief. From what Samantha could tell, Robert seemed oblivious to his surroundings—until her pastor asked the congregation to raise their hands if they had an unspoken prayer request. With great effort, Robert clearly lifted a shaky hand from the arm of his wheelchair and kept it up as the pastor prayed.

Samantha's eyes filled with tears as she witnessed Robert's display of faith in God. In his simple way, he expressed his trust in the One who had created him in his mother's womb. She realized Robert *could* hear the message. His body was still, but his mind apparently reached beyond this disability. In her effort to be a "good" Christian, Samantha had prayed for Robert's parents, his siblings, and for church members to show him kindness, but she had not prayed for Robert's relationship with God. It would have never occurred to her to ask Robert to remember her needs in his prayers.

That day opened Samantha's understanding of how people affected by disabilities know God. With her prompting, it also expanded the vision of her church's outreach team.

Is it more difficult for a person affected by disabilities to have faith than it is for you? Why or why not? When our eyes are opened to see the spiritual needs of people with disabilities, God's Word informs and motivates us to action.

### A. Scripture Illuminates Our Mission

Three significant passages help us understand God's heart for evangelism to those affected by disability and encourage us to join him in his work: Luke 4:18-21, Matthew 28:18-20 and Luke 14:21-23. They give us a clear understanding of the mission of Jesus and the mandate to evangelize all people—men, women and children, able-bodied and those affected by disability.

#### 1. The "Mission Statement"—Luke 4:18-21

Luke 4:18-21 has been called a "mission statement" for the ministry of Jesus, quoted from Isaiah 61:1-3. This mission models what the preaching of the gospel should include. Jesus'

“mission statement” asks us to lay down our lives to bring deliverance (salvation) to the captive. God desires to work through us to evangelize the marginalized—the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives, the blind and the oppressed.

## 2. The Great Commission—Matthew 28:18-20

As disciples of Jesus we speak with and operate under Christ’s authority. Therefore, we have the right and the responsibility to make disciples of Christ in all nations (literally, “all ethnic groups”), which involves baptizing and teaching them the Word of God while modeling the ways and character of the Master, Christ Jesus. This Commission is not completed “until the end,” when Christ physically returns to Earth for his church at the end of time. Meanwhile, he is with us at all times—whether in triumphs, trials, or testing—as we bring the gospel to all nations, especially to the marginalized.

## Mission, Commission and Mandate

	<b>“Mission Statement” Luke 4:18-21</b>	<b>The Great Commission Matthew 28:18-20</b>	<b>Luke 14 Mandate Luke 14:12-24</b>
Connection	How Jesus was directed by the Holy Spirit to preach and express the gospel in thought, word, and deed	Based upon Christ’s sacrifice and mission	The passionate part and a key essential of fulfilling the Great Commission and the Mission Statement
Spokesperson	God the Holy Spirit	God the Son	God the Father (Master of the House)
Audience	Jesus as the example for all disciples to do accordingly	Apostles’ model for the church to carry out	“Servants” (Christians) and the “House” (the church)
Focus	The hurting and marginalized, including those in the disability community	The world— all ethnic groups	The poor and those affected by disability, who are the poorest of the poor
Action	Preaching, healing and delivering	Making disciples, baptizing, teaching	Passionately compelling (evangelizing) people with disabilities to come into the church



### 3. The Luke 14 Mandate—Luke 14:21-23

Luke 14:21-23 is at its core the essence of the heart of God. Rev. Dan'l Markham, Former Director of Joni and Friends Field Ministry, teaches that it is also central to the preaching of the gospel:

“The Great Commission is the distillate of the core theme of the gospel of Luke. It is one of the first Great Commission texts and given with such passion by our Lord Jesus, perhaps the Holy Spirit might be saying something like this: ‘Go out with my fervor to bring the lost into my house, my church. And make sure you go with priority, with haste, and with the greatest zeal to those who are the most marginalized—the poor and those affected by disability, the poorest of the poor. There is no more important task for you to undertake for me.’”<sup>2</sup>

#### B. Acceptance Shines Light in Our Hearts

If we judge the faith of our friends with disabilities by a faulty understanding of what faith actually is, we see them as “incapable” of becoming Christians who can share their faith with us.

Since faith can be observed in simple words and acts, people with mental disabilities are not hindered in their ability to feel and express love for God and others.

In *Expressing Faith in Jesus*, Ronald C. Vredevelde provides a beautiful description of the hearts and minds of those with limited cognitive abilities.

Our friends’ minds are not cluttered with concerns that preoccupy others or with the need to understand and know all about faith. But theirs is not a childish, wobbling, unfounded faith; it is deeply trusting, informed by hearing the stories of God’s people and by living in a broken world. Their faith may not be informed by knowledge of a creed or statement of faith that they have studied, but their faith is nurtured by relationships that reflect the love of Jesus. Their responses to God’s love, which arise from their inner being and are nourished by the Spirit of God, express a simple but very rich faith in Jesus. When the faith community encourages new members with cognitive impairments to express their faith in Jesus, the emphasis is on the belief of the heart rather than the level of knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

## II. God, Open Our Mouths to Speak the Gospel

Salvation only comes through a correct belief in and about Jesus. Whether affected by a disability or not, the preaching of the gospel is the same for all. All must come to Christ in repentance and faith, which is the common salvation and faith delivered “once for all” to the saints (Jude 1:3). The Apostle Peter declared that we are “born again... through the word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23); that is, we receive our spiritual birth into Christ’s kingdom through faith in God’s Word. This implies a correct understanding of God’s Word, which fundamentally includes an understanding of who God is, who Christ is, who man is, and what is the way to salvation.

### A. Salvation Is Based upon Proper Beliefs

#### 1. Who Is Jesus Christ?

Jesus Christ is fully God (Son of God) and fully man (Son of Man).

In 1 John 4:1-6, the Apostle John gave us guidelines to ascertain who is and who is not a Christian. He wrote that the “spirit of error” is indicated by any doctrine excluding the humanity or divinity of Christ. This is confirmed in John 1:1,14 and Colossians 2:9.

Jesus' own statements indicated that he saw himself as having full humanity and full deity (John 8:24, *NASB*). According to Greek scholars, the phrase "I am He" (*ego eimi*) is the Greek form of the Old Testament personal name of God, the great I AM, or Yahweh, meaning that Jesus claimed to be the Timeless One (see also Ex. 3:14).

## 2. Who Is God?

He is a Person and the Trinity.

Biblical theology reveals that God is a Trinity of three Persons. He is neither some impersonal force in the universe nor is he merely human, though in Jesus Christ he took on humanity in order to relate to us through his sacrificial death. He is Creator; there are no other gods beside him, he being the one and only God who reveals himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christian orthodoxy (correct belief) acknowledges God to be beyond what human thought can fully comprehend—for example, he is omniscient (all-knowing) and omnipresent (present everywhere), he is Spirit, and he is eternal (Gen. 1:26-27; Matt. 3:16-17; 28:19; John. 3:16; 4:24; Phil. 2:5-11).

## 3. Who Is Man?

Man (all humanity) is not God or a god, but is made in God's image and likeness. Man is also fallen and in need of a Savior.

### a. Created by God

As many theologians and Bible teachers have articulated, all good and bad theology comes from the statement "God is God and we are not"—or, as Ray Pritchard put it, "He's God and We're Not."<sup>5</sup> Genesis 1:26-27 clearly states that man was created by God in the "image and likeness" of God, that man was the pinnacle of God's creation, designed to think and act like God yet not an equal of God.

### b. Fallen by Choice

Man fell out of fellowship with God through disobedience (sin) and thereby lost full dominion over creation (Gen. 3). He lost his status of being fully in the likeness of God, and lost the full favor of God.

Since Adam, every man and woman has sinned (Rom. 3:10-12; Eph. 2:3; Ps. 51:5; Jer. 17:9) except for "Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John. 2:1, *NASB*). Christ's sinlessness versus man's sinfulness is affirmed in Hebrews 4:14-16. Romans 3:24-25 declares that we are redeemed from our sinful state by God's gift of love through faith in the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ, who bore God the Father's wrath upon the cross, that we might be "justified," or declared not guilty.

The Bible states that man's basic nature is inclined toward evil, is sinful in nature, and can never become God. Man can become a child of God but never equal with God (Isa. 43:10; 44:6, 8; Hos. 11:9; Num. 23:19). Man cannot save himself through his own effort (Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5; Gal. 2:16; Isa. 64:6).

## B. What Is Salvation?

Salvation is through—and only through—Jesus Christ: "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me'" (John. 14:6, *NASB*).

*“If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation” (Romans 10:9-10, NASB).*

Various non-Christian religions declare that man earns his own way to eternal life and/or becomes God or a god. The Bible repudiates such heresy by teaching that we are saved by grace (undeserved, unearned favor from God) through faith in Christ and his atoning sacrifice on the cross. Salvation is a gift of God, not something earned by our good deeds (Eph. 2:8-9). Confession and belief are the critical requisites for a person to become a true believer in Christ.

The Bible reveals that we get one chance at life and eternal life, with no future reincarnations (Heb. 9:27). Thank God, our salvation is based not on what we do or do not do, but rather on who Jesus is and what he has done! Our performance vacillates, but Jesus “is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever” (Heb. 13:8, NASB). Becoming a Christian and growing in Christ requires complete and sole commitment to Jesus Christ (Mark 8:34-38; Matt. 10:32-40).

Following a violent attack, Vicky Olivas knew she needed something to break the chains of depression and bitterness in her life. Heart-wrenching questions haunted her, causing her to mistrust everything she thought she knew about life and even about God.



**VIEW:** When Life Isn't Fair (available at [www.gaa.joniandfriends.org](http://www.gaa.joniandfriends.org))

Today Vicky is a vibrant, productive woman with a new life in Christ. What made the difference?

### III. God, Show Us How to Live What We Proclaim

There are two primary ways to proclaiming the gospel—word and deed.

Ken and Joni Tada have traveled the world over sharing their faith in Jesus Christ. Ken is especially known for taking every opportunity to share a gospel tract with strangers along the way, those with disability and without. He also shows them every kindness in the name of Jesus, believing that even a glass of cold water can start conversations with eternal results. Where does Ken's soul-winning spirit come from? Some believe it has been nurtured in his heart as a caregiver.

#### A. Word: Hearing and Reading

*Proclamation in word without deed leads to an irrelevant gospel.*

*“What things?” he asked. “About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in **word and deed** before God and all the people” (Luke 24:19, emphasis added).*

The gospel proclaims the Word of God regarding who Christ is and how one comes into a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. But proclamation in word is hollow without proclamation through deeds that reflect Christ's character and ministry. People learn primarily through hearing-reading and seeing-experiencing. Hearing-reading is the result of someone proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ, that is, hearing the Word, or reading about the good news in the Bible or a gospel tract.

## B. Deed: Seeing and Experiencing

*Proclamation in deed without word results in a powerless gospel.*

*“You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around **doing good and healing all** who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:37-38, emphasis added).*

Seeing-experiencing results from Christians and churches that demonstrate the good news through acts of love, mercy, and kindness—i.e., how we reflect the character of Christ in our everyday lives (also known as “lifestyle evangelism”).

## C. Joining the Kingdom Work

In “Kingdom Matters in Disability,” Joni Eareckson Tada describes Christians as kingdom builders and the church as a training camp for the kingdom. At church we are equipped to go out into the world to make Christ real and reclaim territory from the devil under the banner of Christ. But Joni makes it clear that the church is not the same thing as the kingdom of God:

The church is the elect of the Father, the redeemed of the Son, and the renewed by the Spirit—in Matthew 16:18, Jesus calls us His church. The church helps people worship God according to the Word, encouraging them to love Jesus Christ as they should. A disability ministry within a church does the same thing. We call and disciple people with disabilities in the Word. We evangelize and disciple them, mentor and encourage them, and help them discover their spiritual gifts and their roles of service and leadership within the church. But that’s not the only role of disability ministry. We have a kingdom role—all people with disabilities in the church have a kingdom role. Unlike the church, the kingdom is not a group of people. It is a reign, the rule of Jesus our Lord.



**READ:** “Kingdom Matters in Disability” by Joni Eareckson Tada (See page 75)

According to Joni’s paper, what does it mean to be a transformational Christian? Where does evangelism fit into the view of the church and the kingdom?

## IV. God, Help Us Share the Gospel in Word and Deed

### A. Principles in Adapting the Message for our Friends with Disabilities

**1. Friends with Intellectual Disabilities**—These friends may have low, medium, or high cognitive functions. They think in concrete terms about spiritual matters and come to know Christ according to their mental age. In the book, *Expressing Faith in Jesus: Church Membership for People with Intellectual Disabilities*, author Ronald C. Vredevelde shares methods for preparing a person with intellectual disabilities for church membership. While there may be some doctrinal differences between church traditions, the book is recommended here for examples of how to address common issues to fully include these friends in your faith community.<sup>6</sup>

*Eighty-nine percent of people with mental disabilities can understand  
Scripture on a third-grade level.*

Dr. Jim Pierson, *Exceptional Teaching*<sup>7</sup>

**2. Friends with Developmental Disabilities**—The spiritual needs of friends on this wide spectrum are often first met through the loving nurture of Christian parents, caregivers and friends. One teacher described her witness to a student with autism like this: “When he has a meltdown, I whisper a prayer or sing a quiet song. Then when he calms down, I celebrate his uniqueness, telling him how important he is to God and to our church family. I always let him know that I am his friend.”

- Relational evangelism happens when we “hang out” with these friends and “do life” together.
- These friends may be able to participate in worship or may be more comfortable in their own special class.
- Use age-appropriate picture cards to share the Christmas and Easter message.
- Adapt church membership and baptism classes to include their needs and welcome them into the body of Christ.
- Create a discipleship plan that addresses one faith concept or goal at a time.

**3. Friends with Hearing or Visual Impairments**—If you do not know sign language, seek the help of a family member who can sign as you witness to someone who is deaf or hearing impaired. Use a simple explanation of the plan of salvation. For people who are visually impaired, give them the Bible in Braille or a Bible CD. You can also have your faith story translated into Braille so the person can read it (with their fingers).

**4. Friends Who Are Nonverbal**—Just because a person is nonverbal does not mean that he or she is incapable of talking with you. Ask if the person uses a message board, computer or signs for “yes” and “no.” Take time to become acquainted with the preferred method of communication before you share your faith story or teach a simple Bible lesson with pictures or objects.

**5. Friends with Physical Impairments**—As in the case of friends with hearing or mental impairments, as well as those who are nonverbal, it is important to remember that physical impairments can vary widely in their degree of severity and in their effects on individual functioning. Never assume that a person with a physical impairment either can or cannot participate in a given activity; it is always better to inquire as to the specific needs of particular individuals.

## **B. Evangelism Tools**

**1. Romans Road**—The Romans Road to salvation is a way of explaining the good news of salvation using verses from the Book of Romans. <http://www.gotquestions.org/Romans-road-salvation.html>



2. **Wordless Book**—This small booklet consists of several blocks of pure color that, in sequence, represent a nonverbal catechism of basic Christian teachings for the instruction of children, adults with illiteracy or people from different cultures. <http://www.berean.org/bibleteacher/wbpage.html>
3. **Gospel Bracelets**—This bracelet uses colored beads like the Wordless Book to present the gospel. [http://www.joniandfriends.org/media/uploads/PDFs/gospel\\_bracelet\\_instructions.pdf](http://www.joniandfriends.org/media/uploads/PDFs/gospel_bracelet_instructions.pdf)
4. **The Four Spiritual Laws**—Developed by Campus Crusade for Christ, this tool is now used (with variations) by many churches, evangelistic and missionary organizations. <http://www.cru.org/how-to-know-god/would-you-like-to-know-god-personally.html>
5. **Created In the Image of God**—This gospel tract was written and published by Joni and Friends specifically to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ to people affected by disability. <http://www.joniandfriends.org/help-and-resources/downloads/created-image-god/>

#### V. God, Open Our Lives to Outreach and Discipleship

One of the best ways to reach out to individuals with disabilities is to care for the whole family. Dr. Dave Deuel, Academic Director of the Master's Academy International, finds that family support groups are vital to seeing people affected by disability turn to God in both sad and happy times. Churches that successfully use support groups as an outreach strategy see families remain together through the power of creating extended families within the church. Dr. Deuel cites the following reasons for family support groups in your church.

#### Why start family support groups?

1. To help families see the church as a caring place where emotional and practical needs can be met.
2. To provide a safe place where parents can share information, as well as their pain and victories.
3. To love people by giving them the gospel. This should never be far from our thinking or conversation.
4. To model for parents ways to help their children through the stages of life and faith development.
5. To mobilize the congregation to compassionately serve in venues they may otherwise have missed.<sup>8</sup>

Earlier in this session, we asked if it was more difficult for people affected by disabilities to have faith than those without disabilities. The answer is yes and no. Their fears and angers may cause them to reject the good news or seek God with greater fervor. It depends on the nurture or rejection that they experience in their lives. And in that way, they are no different than the rest of us. Christians can make a tremendous difference in the trajectory of a family's life if they are ready to care and provide support. As Joni says,

We are about transforming the kingdoms of this world to become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ . . . Whenever people spent time with Jesus, they experienced a hunger for his message. When in the world, we live as Christ would have us live, it prompts the question of "What must I do to be saved like you?"<sup>9</sup>

# Reflections on Session 4

## Outreach and Evangelism to Families Affected by Disability

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1. Someone once suggested that all lack of evangelism was a lack of love on our part as Christians. Do you believe that is true? Why or why not?
2. Why are proper beliefs essential in sharing the gospel message among those with disabilities?
3. Look again at part three of this session. Why is it essential to communicate the gospel in both word and deed? What results when either of these essentials is neglected?
4. In “Joining the Kingdom Work,” a clear difference is mentioned between the church and the kingdom of God. What is this difference? What significance does this make in serving those in the disability community?
5. Part four of this session discusses various principles for adapting the gospel message to individuals with various types of disabilities. What are some additional positive examples you have seen or experienced of adapting the gospel message to these various groups?
6. What are some of the reasons provided for offering support groups for family members of those with disabilities? What are some ways these support groups offer opportunities to share the gospel with family members?



# Kingdom Matters in Disability

Revised by Joni Eareckson Tada

*The material in this paper on the role of the kingdom and the church was originally researched and presented by Paige Benton Brown at the Presbyterian Church of America's Women's Conference in 2006.*

You will often hear me say that disability ministry is all about “advancing the kingdom of Christ.” I often call those who serve in disability ministry “kingdom-minded Christians.” What do I mean by “kingdom” work and why is serving among those with disabilities a kingdom initiative? My friend in the Presbyterian Church of America, Paige Benton Brown, has helped clarify the distinctions between God’s kingdom and his church. In this paper, I have used her insights as a springboard for understanding the role of disability ministry as it relates to the church and the kingdom. Through this, I trust you’ll see how disability ministry reflects the compassion of the Savior, perhaps in a way that no other ministry can.

A glance through the New Testament will reveal that the church and the kingdom are not the same thing. The church is made up of people—followers of Jesus who have been impacted by the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom. The church is the elect of the Father, the redeemed of the Son, and the renewed by the Spirit. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus calls us *his* church. The church has limited responsibilities outlined in the epistles—it exists to proclaim the gospel and to call and disciple, equip and train people in the ministry of God’s Word. The church helps people worship God according to the Word, encouraging them to love Jesus Christ as they should.

A disability ministry within a church does the same. We call, or evangelize, people with disabilities and disciple them in the Word; we make certain the preaching of the Word is accessible to them, and that they have an opportunity to venerate God freely in a church worship setting. We help people with disabilities grasp what the Word of God means and the difference it should make in their lives. We mentor and encourage them to grow in the grace and knowledge of God, helping them discover their spiritual gifts, and their role of service and leadership within the church. But that’s not our only role in disability ministry. We have a kingdom role—*all* people with disabilities in the church have a kingdom role.

Unlike the church, the kingdom is not a group of people. It is a reign, the rule of Jesus, our Lord. When Christ came to earth, he set up his kingdom. Yes, he set it up in the hearts of those who would believe in him, but it is much more than that. When Christ set up his kingdom, he did it in a global sense as well.<sup>1</sup> “The secret of the presence of the kingdom lies in Jesus’ victory over Satan, in his unlimited miraculous power, his unrestricted authority to preach the gospel, in his pronouncements of blessedness and the bestowal of salvation upon his people,” writes Dr. Herman Ridderbos.<sup>2</sup> And so, kingdom work is “pushing out into the world” the effects of the gospel, reclaiming earth as rightfully the Lord’s. Kingdom work is mainly a *battle* against our adversary, the devil, who, when the Fall occurred in the Garden, committed high treason against the rightful King by usurping God’s authority and setting up his own rival kingdom here on earth. He thinks this earth is his, but he’s wrong. He’s only an evil tenant and his hostility is always increasing. When Christ came to set up his kingdom on earth, it meant Satan’s days were numbered. This unlawful usurper only has a short time before he’s cast into the lake of fire. And in this interim between the First Advent (when Jesus Christ set up his kingdom) and his Second Coming (when it will be completed), we live in tension—we’ve been freed from the power of sin, but not its presence; the kingdom has come, but it’s yet to be fulfilled. It’s a struggle, a tension, a war, and *quite* a battle.<sup>3</sup>

Christ has come, but the world has yet to feel the full impact. Paige Benton Brown uses a World War II analogy to illustrate this. The first coming of Christ was like D-Day. When D-Day occurred, it was the turning point of the war; everyone knew it was over for Adolf Hitler. Yet with victory assured, it was still a struggle as the Allies pushed deeper into the darkness of Nazi Europe. Everybody knew Hitler's days were numbered as the Allies advanced, taking back territory the tyrant thought was rightfully his; but it was still a fight. People died. People got injured. The Second Coming of Christ is like VE-Day; the day when victory is finally secured. Satan will be cast out and Christ will sit on the throne of earth restored. Until that time, you and I are pushing deep into the darkness of Satan's territory. We are making real in the world what has been accomplished at the cross. We are mopping up until Jesus comes back and reconciles all things to himself. All enemies will be under his feet. The whole universe will rejoice as Christ will rule as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Kingdom work is planting firmly in the soil of the world, banners of justice, peace, righteousness, joy, truth, beauty, and every other kingdom characteristic. While the church restrains and restricts itself to training and holding people to the Word, the kingdom is not limited. For example, there are limitations for Christian women in the church<sup>4</sup>—Scripture makes it clear that women are not to assume the office of pastor.<sup>5</sup> However, there are *unlimited* roles for Christian women in the kingdom—women represent Christ as leaders in hospitals, corporations, universities, courtrooms, school boards or in government. The parameters of the kingdom are everywhere. There are limitations for the church in the world, but none on the kingdom of God.

This makes the church a base camp for the kingdom; a training camp where Christians are equipped to go out into the world, make Christ real, and reclaim territory under the banner of Christ. No area of society should go unchallenged for the Lordship of Christ—whether the arts, media, education, medicine, business, or politics.

## Challenging the World of Disability for Christ's Sake

Allow me to use Joni and Friends as an example. Our ministry works alongside the church to evangelize and disciple people with disabilities, train them in the Word, and teach them to be worshipers of God. What is kingdom work for Joni and Friends? It's contending for ethical stem cell research and manufacturing Regency Pediatric wheelchairs in prisons. It's writing articles against physician-assisted suicide and advocating against state budget cuts that endanger needed social services for people with disabilities. It's contending for the rights of the intellectually-disabled in Thailand who are chained to the walls of mental institutions. It's appearing on *Larry King Live* and recording awareness-raising public service announcements. It's our Policy Center at the Christian Institute on Disability. Even our Family Retreats and Wheels for the World outreach trips can be considered kingdom work. Joni and Friends' kingdom mandate is to challenge every area of disability for the sake of Jesus Christ.

You've heard the phrase "biblical worldview," but a worldview is merely an assessment. A worldview, even a biblical one, is an appraisal of the world, a point of view. But the kingdom is not a view, it's a *reality*. It's an obligation. Paige Benton Brown writes, "We may possess a worldview, but the kingdom possesses us. We may own a worldview, but the kingdom owns us. It's a view that always leads to action, forcing us to ask, 'How can I get engaged? How can I showcase the truth of Jesus Christ in this area? How can I use the gifts God has given me to effect transformation in the world?'"

The average Christian is uneasy with this. Sometimes believers assume that only "church work" is spiritual activity. They think real Christian work is only that which happens in the church and "Who cares what happens out in the world?" Who cares if unborn babies with Down syndrome are aborted? Who cares if young men with spinal-cord injuries are being warehoused in nursing homes for lack of a place to live? Who cares if qualified people with disabilities are denied jobs unfairly? Who cares if people in comas are



euthanized? *After all, some Christians think, the whole world is going to hell in a hand basket, and the best we can do is send out raiding parties into the world to quickly make converts, then bring them back into the safe walls of the church where we all just hunker down and wait and be safe until Jesus returns.*

This view is unchristian; it's wrong. It is way too conservative. People who hold this view don't care if a person eats, as long as he knows Jesus. At the same time, there are people who don't care if a person knows Jesus, as long as he eats. This view is wrong, as well—it's too liberal. It eliminates salvation from the gospel of the kingdom. Christians who follow this view see God's work in the world as no different from his work in the church. "We're all God's children," they will say. "We're all under the same umbrella, and teaching the Bible is really no different from teaching a literacy course. It's all for God's good." Both conservative and liberal views are wrong.

The correct view is neither conservative nor liberal, but *transformational*. We are about transforming the kingdoms of this world to become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ. Paige Benton says, "Transformational Christians view the church as family, as training camp, as base camp, as boot camp. The church is a place of preparation where Christians are loved and taught and supported to go out into the world to effect change." Christians must carry Christ into the media, schools, in economics and medicine, in technology and politics. We *transform* these areas through kingdom work, and as a result, culture is *changed*.

The area of disability is in desperate need of transformation, as well. The global plight of people with disabilities is desperate, and at Joni and Friends, we encourage Christians to use their gifts to serve God where the needs are greatest. As my friend Paige says, "Go where the kingdom is weakest." Christ should be made real where the world is at its darkest. Go into nursing homes or institutions for the intellectually disabled; bring justice and mercy, beauty and righteousness into such places. Serve as advocates in the disability community, and bring equity and fairness to unjust social policies. Serve at a Joni and Friends' Family Retreat and bring compassion to families affected by disability. Serve on a *Wheels for the World* trip and push out the kingdom in countries where cerebral palsy is considered a curse by a witch doctor, or persons with epilepsy are thought to be demon possessed. Let's transform lives with the gospel . . . let's transform cultures through kingdom initiatives!

## Evangelism in the Kingdom

People wonder how evangelism fits into this view of the church and the kingdom. When we begin living out Christ among artists, politicians, educators, and health care professionals, it will trigger the question, "Why do you live the way you do?" People want to know what makes transformational Christians so *different*. Kingdom work prompts the salvation question. It's what Jesus did. People were drawn to him. Whenever people spent time with Jesus, they experienced a hunger for his message. When in the world, we live as Christ would have us live, it prompts the question of "What must I do to be saved like you?"

Recently I met Eunice Im who attends the youth group at the First Mandarin Baptist Church in Los Angeles. Her youth group, led by Arthur and Sandra Hsieh, supporters of Joni and Friends, often serves as stewards when we hold Disability Ministry Training Summits. Under the Hsieh's leadership, this group of young people also volunteers at Joni and Friends' Family Retreat at Murrieta Hot Springs in Temecula. And they raised over \$80,000 for *Wheels for the World*. I learned that Eunice has a younger sister, Karen, with autism. Up until Eunice's family attended Family Retreat, she had never looked at her sister as a friend, but as her "autistic sibling." Eunice wrote me recently:

I want to celebrate your life because through you and specifically through the Family Retreats I now experience more of the abundance of life in Jesus Christ. For me, it has meant accepting and loving my sister. Now, when I interact with Karen, I see a person. I see a person that I want to get to know,



a person that I care about, rather than as a person who has a diagnosis of autism.

Eunice is an honors student at UCLA where she is studying medicine. This remarkable young woman plans to go into research to find a treatment for autism. *That* is kingdom work. And as she makes Christ real to all those around her, her work—her *ministry*—is as “spiritual” as the activities her youth group participates in at her church.

Joni and Friends connects with hundreds of young people like Eunice. When I go to a Family Retreat, I meet so many college freshmen and sophomores who are serving as volunteers. At the close of the week, it is soul-stirring to hear them say, “I’m going to declare a major in special education!” Or recreational therapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy or physical therapy. That’s kingdom work. Just like medical researchers like Eunice, or the Christian businessmen that hire the disabled. When Eunice finally graduates out into the world, I know she will be a transformational Christian; she’ll see First Mandarin Baptist Church as her family, her training camp, her base camp. She’ll remain strong doing kingdom work in the world because her church will have restrained itself to its God-given role of mentoring, discipling and training her.

What role does the church have in politics? None. What do Christians attending a church have to do with politics? Everything. I hope some in the Hsieh’s youth group will one day run for the California state assembly. I hope that my young friend Emily Shanahan, who has cerebral palsy and is a senior at Cedarville University, might one day consider going into constitutional law. I can envision the day when Emily, like Eunice, will carry the kingdom banner into the world, provoking life-transforming questions from non-believers.

I can just picture Eunice one day among her fellow researchers. They will be in their lab coats working alongside her and asking, “What makes you so dedicated? Why are you living like this? How can I have the peace that you have? Who is this Jesus that you follow?” Eunice will be out in the world shaking salt, shining light, sowing gospel seed and making people thirsty for more than this world can give. She won’t be viewed as a “right-wing radical who only cares about saving people then retreating within the confines of their church walls... or a Christian who just sits on her hands until Jesus comes back.” No, her co-workers will view her differently because she *cares* about this world.

## Redemption Is Greater than We Think

Jesus loves this world. He created its beauty and variety; its people of various tongues and nations. True, the Fall marred its image and stained its landscape; it produced a world filled with sin, but it’s still *God’s* world. He’s the rightful owner and ruler, and he invites us to partner with him in reclaiming it under the Family banner. Never be pessimistic about this world. God requires that we be optimistic and know that good will ultimately triumph. We are to be his change-agents in this awesome divine plan to advance the kingdom, reclaim the earth as rightfully the Lord’s, and push back the kingdom of darkness, preserving culture, influencing society, and transforming culture. The gospel of the kingdom is about setting things—*all* things—right.

Heaven is the final restoration of earth under the authority of Christ. People often ask me what I am looking forward to in heaven. If I were self-centered about it, I could easily say, “Oh, I can’t wait to get my new body. I’m going to jump, dance, kick around and do aerobics. I’m going to see all my friends and relatives. I’m going to see my mom and dad who have long-since gone home to be with Jesus.” We’re so me-focused—even about heaven. Rather, let’s be excited that in heaven, we will celebrate the crowning of Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We’re going to be in that great choir who will sing, “*And he shall reign forever and ever!*”

So the goal of redemption is the renewal of all things, not just our souls and bodies. This means that the Fall is bigger than personal salvation, and redemption is bigger than forgiveness. There’s much, much more wrong with this world than our personal sin. *Everything* is poisoned, everything fell under the curse in the Garden of Eden, and one day *everything* will be restored—a new earth *and* new heavens where peace and justice



and love and righteousness are realities. We kingdom-minded Christians live our lives in view of that goal.

I encourage you to go where the kingdom is weakest, where Satan's domain is most fierce. Be salt and light in your communities, in nursing homes, mental institutions, and residential facilities for disabled people. Make the kingdom strong there. And may your efforts be like the mustard seed becoming a tree that fills the whole garden, like the leaven that permeates through the whole loaf. As my friend Paige says, "We're not about maintenance." I agree; we're about *marching*. I love to sing as I leave the International Disability Center each evening. Wheeling down the ramp I'll sing, *We've a story to tell to the nations . . . or We're marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion*. Those are energizing words, principles with which I inform my conscience, keep my spirit right, and sharpen my perspective so that I don't become a pessimist in this warped and poisoned world. I'm not about maintenance and I don't want you to be either.

I trust that this message has given you a bigger picture about disability ministry in the church and in the world. I hope you have better grasped the role of the church to equip you in worship, prayer, and Bible study. But I also hope you see your kingdom role. So sign up as a short-term missionary for next year's Family Retreats, go on a trip with Wheels for the World, become an ombudsman at a local nursing home where elder abuse is a nasty secret, minister in residential care facilities, become informed on stem cell research, write letters to the editor of your city's newspaper, call your senators and congressmen—and do it as a transformational Christian.

#### NOTES

1. Jesus talks about the kingdom and what it's like in the parables of the sower (Matthew 13:18-23), of the tares among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30), of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32), and of the leaven (Matthew 13:33). These kingdom parables describe the impact the preaching of the gospel has on the world.
2. Herman Ridderbos, "The Coming of the Kingdom," The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Philadelphia, PA, 1962, pg. 82.
3. This is why not every person with a disability who prays for healing experiences a divine miracle. The Bible never guarantees that every person who requests physical healing will be healed. Why should we single out disease – just one of the results of man's Fall – insisting Christians shouldn't have to put up with disabilities. Why not? We put up with hurricanes and other catastrophes of nature. We put up with the sinful attitudes and actions of people around us. When Christ came to earth to set up the kingdom, He *began* to put it into motion. But it won't be completed until Jesus returns to close the curtain once and for all on sin, Satan and suffering. Then, the eye of *every* eye will be opened, the ears of all those who are deaf will be unstopped, and every lame person will leap for joy (Isaiah 35:5-6).
4. 1 Corinthians 11:5; 1 Corinthians 14:34; Ephesians 1:22; 1 Timothy 2:12; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 2:4
5. The Presbyterian Church of America often allows women to team-teach with men, as well as in mixed audience settings. Women missionaries serving on the field often assume leadership positions until such time as men are equipped to serve as pastors and elders.



**Joni Eareckson Tada** is the founder of Joni and Friends International Disability Center, a nonprofit ministry with a global outreach. A diving accident in 1967 left Joni, then 17, a quadriplegic in a wheelchair. Since then, Joni's wisdom and influence have been shared with the world through bestselling books, radio programs, television programs and frequent speaking. Her radio program is carried by over 1,000 broadcast outlets and heard by over a million listeners. Joni is also an accomplished artist and singer. She has served on the National Council on Disability and the Disability Advisory Committee to the U.S. State Department.



# Endnotes

## WHY CHURCHES NEED A DISABILITY MINISTRY

1. Luke 14:21-23
2. Matt. 28:19-20
3. 2 Cor. 1:3-5, Gal. 6:2
4. 1 Cor. 12:7
5. Ps. 82:3-4, Prov. 22:22-23
6. Phil. 1:6, Heb. 10:24-25
7. Prov. 31:8-9, Luke 10:36-37
8. Prov. 3:3, 1 John 4:8,19

## SESSION ONE

1. Henrietta C. Mears, *What the Bible Is All About*. (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2007), p. 250.
2. Dorothy Kelley Patterson & Rhonda Harrington Kelley, eds. *Women's Evangelical Commentary: New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), p. 129-137.
3. John 3:17, 1 John 2:8, John 1:18
4. Luke 1:1-4:20; 24:44-49
5. Luke 9:51-18:34
6. Dan'l Markham, "The Lost Great Commission", *Beyond Suffering Study Guide Course Reader*. (Agoura Hills, CA, Joni and Friends, 2011).
7. This is similar to the personal application Jesus stresses in Luke 14:5 regarding the man's son or ox in a well.
8. John Piper, "Whom Shall We Invite to Thanksgiving Dinner?" (Sermon, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Nov. 9, 1980)
9. William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House, 1978), p. 725.
10. John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Vol. 35B). (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1993) p. 734, 736.
11. Luke 14:15.
12. Luke 14:18, literal translation; see G. R. Berry, *Today's Parallel Greek English New Testament*. (Richmond, VA: Foreign Missions Journal, SBC, 1976).
13. Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*. (Edinburgh, UK: Morrison and Gibb Limited, 1989), p. 361.
14. Hendriksen, p. 732.
15. Joni and Friends, "Outreach: Breaking Bread at a Luke 14 Banquet", *Special Needs Smart Pages*. (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2009), p. 142.
16. Paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 11:1

## SESSION TWO

1. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 7th printing. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), pp. 1028-1030.
2. Matthew 16:18, 18:17
3. John 21
4. Ephesians 1:22; Colossians 1:18
5. James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.)
6. Erik W. Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities*. (Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2007), p. 27.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7
8. Ephesians 4:16; Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12

## SESSION THREE

1. Gene Newman and Joni Eareckson Tada, *All God's Children: Ministry with Disabled Persons*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), p. 9.
2. James 2:14-17
3. Commerce Department's Census Bureau on March 16, 2001. U.S. Census Bureau, <http://usgovinfo.about.com/library/weekly/aa031701a.htm>
4. Pat Verbal, "The Special Needs Ministry Launch Countdown Checklist," *Special Needs Special Ministry*. (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2004), pp. 34-35. Action tool adapted from one by Dr. Scott Daniels and Dr. Steve Green.
5. Pat Verbal, "Getting the Word Out About Your Special Needs Ministry," *Special Needs Special Ministry*. (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2004), pp. 66-67.

## SESSION FOUR

1. Joni Eareckson Tada, *Pearls of Great Price* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), April 27th entry.
2. Dan'l Markham, Discovery of the Lost Mandate: Turning Weaknesses and Religious Attitudes on Their Heads. Unpublished manuscript, 2007b, pp. 40-41.
3. Timothy George, *The Complete Evangelism Guidebook* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2006) pp 26-28.
4. Ronald C. Vredevel, *Expressing Faith in Jesus: Church Membership for People with Intellectual Disabilities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2005), p. 12. Available at <http://www.faithaliveresources.org/>.
5. Ray Pritchard, *He's God and We're Not* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2003).
6. Ronald C. Vredevel, *Expressing Faith in Jesus: Church Membership for People with Intellectual Disabilities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2005).
7. Jim Pierson, *Exceptional Teaching: A Comprehensive Guide for Including Students with Disabilities* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Publishing, 2002).
8. Dave Deuel, "Outreach and In-Reach to Families Affected by Disabilities: Ministering through Family Groups," *Beyond Suffering Study Guide Course Reader*. (Agoura Hills, CA: Joni and Friends, 2011).
9. Joni Eareckson Tada, "Kingdom Matters in Disability" (Agoura Hills, CA: Joni and Friends, 2011).





# Beyond Suffering Course Options

There are three ways people can enroll in the full 16-session *Beyond Suffering* course:

1. **Certificate of Completion:** This option will enhance students' understanding of God's purpose in suffering and disability, and challenge their vision for serving in a local or global ministry. The certificate is earned through participation in lectures, discussions, DVD case studies, and selected readings. Students will also finish three assignments in order to apply for the Certificate of Completion.
2. **Enrichment:** Some students will want to work through these materials for personal enrichment rather than for a Certificate of Completion or academic credit. These students are encouraged to work through all of the lessons and read all of the papers. Although they are not required to do any of the assignments associated with the lessons, there is much to be gained spiritually and practically from the lessons and readings alone.
3. **Credit:** Students may earn undergraduate or graduate level credits for completing the Beyond Suffering Certificate Program. Please note that the accrediting institution may require additional reading and written assignments. For additional information about For-Credit options, please contact Joni and Friends ([cid@joniandfriends.org](mailto:cid@joniandfriends.org))
4. **Online:** Students can choose from three classes offered online through Joni and Friends.
  - A 16-week Certificate Course includes video lectures and participation in weekly online group discussions. Assignments are submitted online and must be completed in the 16 weeks to earn the Certificate of Completion.
  - An Independent Study Program allows students to work at their own pace, submitting assignments online, with six months to earn a Certificate of Completion.
  - The Leadership Training Seminar is a five-day online training for students who have completed the Certificate Course, and seek to become Certified Leaders of the *Beyond Suffering* Course. Potential leaders must submit an application and be approved before taking this course.

For a current schedule or additional information about any of the enrollment options, please visit [www.joniandfriends.org/BYS](http://www.joniandfriends.org/BYS).



# Sermon Outlines

## SERMON 1

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# Disability Ministry: A Biblical Mandate

Scripture Reading: Luke 14:1-24

## Introduction

Today we're looking at the biblical mandate for disability ministry and its importance to the kingdom. Our text opens with Jesus in the home of a prominent Pharisee along with other elite members of the community. While there, Jesus encounters a man with a disabling condition involving abnormal swelling. The others watch carefully as Jesus heals the man and sends him on his way.

The text now moves to the contrasting image of the other guests vying for the most desirable seats at the dinner table. Jesus uses this moment to tell a parable about the nature of the kingdom of God. Several aspects of the story stand out:

### **1. The places of honor are the host's decision.**

- Jesus tells a simple, straightforward parable about guests being humiliated because they chose their seats of honor rather than allowing the host to determine the positions of honor.
- This scenario is not new to Jesus' listeners. Proverbs 25:6-7 gives the same warning.

### **2. Jesus' care for the disabled man is not a new idea for God's people.**

- Compare Deuteronomy 15:4, Psalm 82:3-4, Proverbs 31:8-9, Jeremiah 22:16, Leviticus 19:14, and Deuteronomy 27:18.
- As experts in the law, the Pharisees knew the commands of God regarding the poor and disabled, but they did not follow them. They did not understand who is great in the kingdom of God. Jesus wanted them to realize their goal should not be to claim seats of honor, but rather to claim the broken for the kingdom.

### **3. Jesus gives a personal, specific charge to the host.**

- He was not speaking in generalities. The Greek word for "you" here is singular, referring specifically to the host.
- Sharing a meal together was a symbol of acceptance and friendship. Jesus was mandating a lifestyle of inclusive friendship with those affected by disability.

### **4. Jesus' words are more than a mandate—they are a rebuke.**

- People with disabilities were viewed as cursed, and were marginalized and segregated.
- Jesus challenged these barriers and revealed the heart of God: people with disabilities are central to the kingdom of God.

**5. People with disabilities have a place at the table of God... and our tables as well!**

- The next parable tells of invited guests who refuse to attend a great banquet. The host sends his servants to round up guests who would never expect to get such an invitation, those whom one would have to “compel to come in” because they would have such a difficult time believing the invitation was really for them.

**6. The church today, representing the kingdom of God, ought to be composed of the poor and disabled.**

- God is the host in the parable. He wants his servants to go out quickly because his glory is at stake. His house is to be filled to capacity with people affected by disability, glorifying him by worshiping his name.
- God is calling the church around the world to repentance with regard to how we have treated people with disabilities.
- God is calling his body to obey his command to evangelize, disciple and empower for service individuals and families affected by disability.

**7. The mandate is biblical, it is clear, and it is a blessing.**

- In verse 14, we read that a life of inclusion of those with disabilities is a life of blessing.
- Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 that those who appear to be least important among us are actually the greatest. Those parts that are weaker and seem unimportant are in fact indispensable to the body.

## Conclusion

Whether non-disabled or disabled, God has given every member of his body natural and spiritual gifts. When people affected by disability are absent from the body of Christ, the body is incomplete. Who is missing from our church? Who have we failed to bring in?

## SERMON 2

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# Hope in the Midst of Suffering

Scripture Reading: Romans 8:22

### Introduction

According to the United Nations, 80% of the estimated 1 billion disabled people in the world live in developing countries where resources are limited. Out of this number, more than 200 million are children. According to Disability World, 97% of these children will suffer from abuse or neglect and most will never have access to health care or education. The World Bank reports that 20% of the world's poorest people are those with disabilities.

If you were to assemble people with disabilities from around the world together in one geographical area, they would form a population with the least access to education, healthcare, vocational opportunities and community life, including church involvement.

We live in a fallen world. Everyone suffers in some way. As Paul says, all creation groans with suffering, longing for its redemption. But today we can move beyond the pain of suffering and into hope.

### **1. Complete relief from suffering will not be realized in this life.**

- Christ came to relieve suffering and bring healing (Luke 4:18-19), but the poor will always be among us (Mark 14:7).
- We dwell in temporary “tents” while on this earth, and they can be destroyed, but Christ is preparing an eternal “building” (2 Corinthians 5:1-10).
- Suffering leads us to hope found in Christ in this life and the life to come (Romans 5:3-11).

### **2. God is both sovereign and good.**

- In his sovereignty he has a plan for all our life circumstances (Exodus 4:11; Genesis 50:19-20; Acts 3:18).
- In his goodness he works all things, including disabilities, for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purposes (Romans 8:28; Philippians 1:6).

### **3. God's plan to bring hope to people with disabilities around the world is the church.**

- Most churches know that ministry to the poor, disabled and disadvantaged is a good thing, but it has not been a priority.
- Luke 14:12-24 constitutes a mandate demonstrating that ministry to people with disabilities is central to God's plan.
- Too often we call people with disabilities a “burden,” when in fact our attitudes reflect an unwelcoming spirit in our homes and churches.



#### **4. God's heart is for people with disabilities to be central to the kingdom of God.**

- Scripture is filled with commands to minister to the poor, weak, outcast and disabled (Deuteronomy 15:4; Psalm 82:3-4; Proverbs 31:8-9; Jeremiah 22:16).
- Ministry is motivated by obedience to God's Word.
- In Luke 14 the host desires that his house be filled with people affected by disability. This is the nature of the kingdom of God and its King, and it is to be the nature of the church as well.

#### **5. The mandate is biblical, it is clear, and it is a blessing.**

- A lifestyle of friendship and inclusion of people with disabilities is a life of blessing (Luke 14:14).
- No member of the body, whether seemingly more or less "important," is to be excluded. The parts that are "weaker" are indispensable (1 Corinthians 12:12-26).
- Whether non-disabled or disabled, God has given every member of his body natural and spiritual gifts. When people affected by disability are absent from the body of Christ, the body is incomplete. Who is missing from our church?

### **Conclusion**

If we are to reflect the kingdom of God, we must reflect the King. Often the doorway to reaching a community for Christ is ministry to—and with—people with disabilities. Through them, God is able to exalt his message of love, peace, redemption and hope. If God can give individuals affected by disability hope in the midst of their suffering, then others realize that he can give them hope eternal as well, a hope that is truly beyond suffering!

## SERMON 3

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# Nothing Is Wasted

Scripture Reading: Romans 8:28

### Introduction

In God's economy, nothing is wasted. No circumstance in your life or mine surprises God. He does not set anyone on the shelf, marked as "unusable" or "wasted." No, we serve a God who redeems every situation of our lives and uses it for his glory.

Romans 8:28 speaks to that reality, but for some it can seem to pour salt on an open wound. When a person is suffering and struggling, the truth of this verse can feel as distant as the stars in the universe. But let's take another look, because this passage is intended to instruct us when life turns us inside out and upside down, and we have lost our way.

#### **1. God's goodness brings about what is best for us.**

- This verse does not say merely, "God is going to work everything out for my good." Without further qualification, this is only a partial truth.
- We must understand what is good in light of the goodness of God. Outside of that context, our definition of good is flawed and earthly.
- God defines good from a heavenly and eternal perspective. While he cares about our comfort and wellbeing, his goodness reaches beyond the here and now. Compare Psalm 34:8 and Psalm 100:5.
- Part of that good is the reality that God is conforming us to the image of Christ. God is intimately involved in our life circumstances and actively working on our behalf, in light of his goodness. Our confidence should be in the character and goodness of God himself.
- In his goodness, God is using life circumstances, pain, grief, suffering and disability to drive us to himself, perfecting Christ in us (2 Corinthians 12:9).

#### **2. God's love brings meaning to life.**

- Apart from a loving relationship with God, there is no meaning in the midst of suffering, disability or pain. It is only in the context of this relationship that our life circumstances can make any sense. As this verse says, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him..."

#### **3. God's plans give us purpose.**

- There is a direct correlation between God's goodness, his purposes and his glory. John 9:2-3 answers the question regarding God's purposes in disability. God's plan and purpose for this blind man's life was to demonstrate the power of the gospel. Can you imagine how differently this man would have been treated if people knew he had been designed and placed specifically to display the glory of God?

- We live to bring glory to God, not because he wants self-glory, but because he is deserving of it. And when he is glorified and placed in his rightful place in our hearts, people are drawn to the Savior. We begin to understand our purpose in light of God's eternal purposes.
- Exodus 4:11 clearly reveals God's role in a person's disability. It was in the mind of God to create Moses with a speech impairment. Moses was to be the very mouthpiece of God, and he could not afford to rely upon his own eloquence when communicating God's words.
- God uses disability, pain and suffering to drive us into the arms of Christ our Savior. As Joni Eareckson Tada has said, "God permits what he hates to accomplish what he loves."

## Conclusion

God has a purpose for everything. Nothing is wasted in his redeeming design. Fulfilling God's purposes and bringing him glory gives us meaning and purpose. When is the last time you asked God, "How does all of my life—the good, the bad, and the difficult—fulfill your purposes and bring you glory?" Because in bringing God glory, we discover our greatest good.

# Glossary of Common Physical and Intellectual Disabilities

## Physical Disabilities

**Acquired brain injury** is an injury at or after birth due to trauma, disease, aneurysms, tumors or strokes. Impacts movement, memory, cognition, and language. When, where and how brain is affected will mitigate outcomes.

**Blind or Visually impaired** can result from Trachoma infectious disease, cataracts, macular degeneration, glaucoma, retinitis. Impacts vision in that it is limited to absent. Gradual or sudden loss of vision; some may be reversed with optics or surgery.

**Deaf or Hearing impaired** can result from genetics, premature birth, infections or disease. Impacts hearing in that it is limited to absent. May affect speech and learning; may be considered a cultural difference not a disability.

**Missing limbs** can result from birth defects, disease, injuries. Impacts physical function depending upon limbs affected. Number of limbs impacted and to what degree varies.

**Multiple sclerosis** is an autoimmune disease attacking the protective sheath that covers nerves. Impacts nerves causing deterioration and affecting the ability to walk and talk. Symptoms vary and MS can be difficult to diagnose.

**Muscular dystrophy** is an inherited gene passed on following X linked or autosomal dominant patterns. Impacts movement through the degeneration primarily of voluntary muscles. Can have rapid or slow onset and progress, may affect involuntary muscles.

**Post polio syndrome** is linked to Polio infection, but the exact cause of degraded motor function is unknown. Impacts movement causing limited mobility and paralysis. Can be more common in developing countries.

**Spina bifida** results when the neural tube which becomes the brain and spinal cord does not develop or close properly resulting in problems with the spinal cord and bones of backbone. Impacts motor functioning and sensation below the point evidencing lack of development. May also impact bowel and bladder control.

**Spinal cord injury** results from a severed or injured spinal cord. Impacts movement, use of limbs, bowel functioning, nervous sensation. May result in partial or full effects (sensation, paralysis, etc.); susceptibility to infection.

**Stroke** results when the blood supply to a portion of the brain is reduced or cut off, damaging brain cells. Impacts brain functioning in affected areas evidenced by a loss of speech, paralysis or damage of other functions. The effects and prognosis for recovery vary.

## Intellectual Disabilities

**Asperger's syndrome** has an unknown cause. The impact is similar to autism, particularly affecting social interactions; often referred to as high functioning autism. May include disabilities in speech and language.

**Autism** has an unknown cause. Impacts communication and sensory integration resulting in difficulty interacting, learning, leisure and play. Typically appears during first 3 years; effects range from mild to severe.

**Cerebral palsy** results from neurological damage or abnormal brain development. Impacts muscle strength, rigidity/flexibility, control, movement and balance, and speech. Spastic is most common form and in varying degrees, quadriplegia impacting all four limbs.

**Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (CDD)** has an unknown cause. Impacts language, motor skills and social functioning. Typical development for 3-4 years followed by regression in motor functioning, language and social skills.

**Down syndrome** results from an extra copy of #21 chromosome, hence the name Trisomy-21. Impacts intellectual function, muscle tone and social development. The effects can range from mild to severe.

**Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD)** has an unknown cause. Impacts individual in various ways; PDD actually refers to the entire autism spectrum, including childhood autism, Asperger's and Rett syndrome, disintegrative disorder, and PDD not otherwise specified.

**PDD NOS (not otherwise specified)** has an unknown cause with possible brain/spinal cord issues. Impacts social functioning in a less severe manner than classic autism, and is considered a milder form of autism not evidencing all symptoms.

**Rett syndrome** is a neurodevelopmental disorder that almost exclusively affects girls and is characterized by normal early growth, followed by developmental delays. Impacts the purposeful use of the hands, brain and head growth, walking, with seizures and intellectual disability. Can see typical development followed by regression of development, at variable ages of onset.



# An Invitation to Join the Global Disability Community

The Global Access Association is an online community hosted by Joni and Friends.

Disabilities affect people from all countries, communities, and economic strata. The Global Access Association is a place to connect and share with leaders who are passionate about disability ministry. Join ministers, educators, and practitioners from around the world who work to evangelize, disciple, meet practical needs, and encourage the inclusion of families affected by disabilities in churches and communities everywhere.

Through the Global Access Association, you can share experiences, forge strong working relationships, and learn how to practically and effectively promote disability ministry in your church or organization. Stay up-to-date on the latest association updates through the blog. Stream or download documents, audio files, and videos from the resource library. Ask and answer questions in the online forum and tap into a global community of like-minded individuals.

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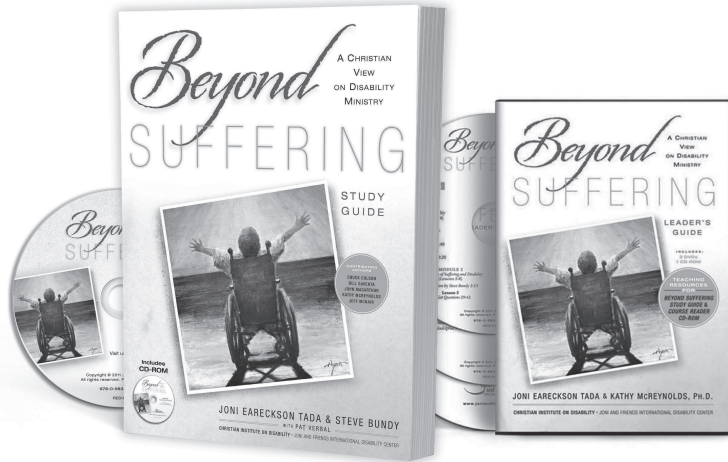




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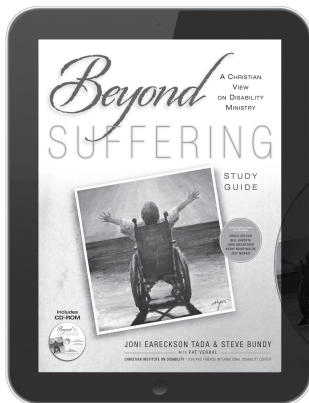
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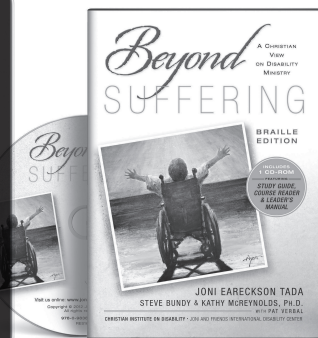
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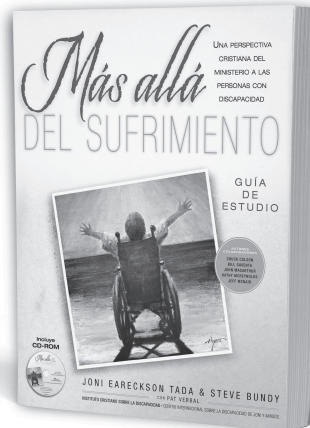
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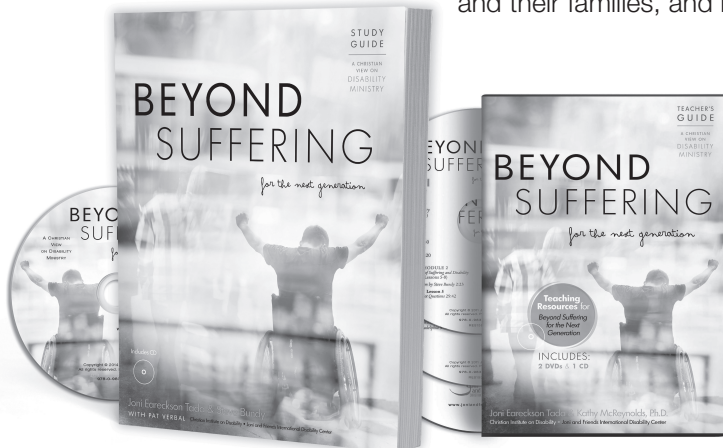


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